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Young Rough Riders Weekly

MOST FASCINATING WESTERN STORIES

Down went the young Rough Rider, feet first, right in the midst of his three enemies.

The Young Rough Riders Weekly

Most Fascinating Western Stories

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The Young Rough Rider's Silver Mine;

OR,

THE TEXAS GIANT.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

It was just about dusk when a single horseman might have been seen riding slowly along a lonely road that wound about one of the wooded hills in Southern California.

The figure of the horseman was one that was worth looking at a second time.

He was a boy of about the middle height but of so compact and well-knit a form that he seemed smaller, if anything, than he actually was.

He had a face that was remarkable for the frankness of its expression, and that would have won for him the name of being handsome even had he not been so well built.

He was brown-eyed and brown-haired, with a fresh, rosy color under his coat of tan.

He was clad in a close-fitting khaki costume, cut after the military fashion, and wore a brown sombrero and a pair of leather leggins.

This was the boy famous throughout the West as Ted Strong, the young rough rider. He had formerly served in the rough riders. After the war, he had come West to run a ranch, organizing for the purpose a company of boys who were known as the young rough riders.

At present, he had come down to California, partly to see the country and partly to purchase a silver mine there which had lately been discovered near the town of San Pablo and which would surely bring in a fortune to the man who worked it.

Gardner, the man from whom the young rough rider was planning to purchase the mine, lived in a lonely house far around on the side of the hill under which the mine lay.

Ted had already got together a syndicate for the purchase of the mine.

All the preliminary arrangements for the transfer of the mine had been made, and the young rough rider, as the agent of the syndicate, was on a visit to Gardner to

have him sign the final papers and to turn over the deeds that gave him a right to the mine.

The young rough rider's mission was one that would have been considered dangerous by most people.

San Pablo was known as one of the most lawless towns in the West.

It was known that there had been a conspiracy on the part of certain lawless characters to get the deeds of the mine and rob Gardner of it.

The mine was a very ancient one, having been worked by the Spaniards and the Indians before them, but till Gardner had discovered that there was a rich lode of silver in it, it had been thought to be absolutely valueless.

At the same time that Gardner had made the discovery, other lawless characters of the town of San Pablo had also found that the mine was valuable, and already attempts had been made to get the deeds out of Gardner's hands.

Gardner lived in a very lonely place on the side of the mountain, and the young rough rider knew that he could not act too quickly in getting the deeds out of his hands.

Although outlawry had been stamped out for the time being at San Pablo, there was no knowing how soon it might break out again.

While the deeds remained in that lonely house with only Gardner and the daughter who lived with him to guard them, they were a constant temptation to theft and robbery.

A coach ran between Monterey, the nearest railroad point, and San Pablo, but the young rough rider had not waited for the coach this day.

He had secured a horse at Monterey and had made much faster time between that town and the old Spanish settlement than the coach could have done.

It had been sunset when the young rough rider had ridden around the bend of the trail on which Gardner's house was situated.

When he reached the house itself, it was quite dark.

As he drew nearer to it and came within sight of it he urged his horse to a faster speed.

It was not the darkness nor the lonely nature of the road that made him do this.

It was another circumstance which the young rough rider considered a great deal more alarming than either of these.

The house which he was coming to was in pitch darkness.

Not a light shone from any of the windows, and it looked as deserted as though it had never been inhabited.

Ted knew that it was the custom of Gardner to light lamps in the lower room at nightfall.

Gardner, although living in such an out-of-the-world place, was considerable of a scholar, and it was his habit to spend his evenings reading, or having his daughter read to him.

The fact that there was no light shining out of any of the windows now made the clear-cut face of the young rough rider become grave and suddenly serious.

He dashed up to the door of the house at a full gallop, and, casting the reins of his steed over a snubbing post that stood close beside the long veranda, ran up the steps.

The front door was wide open.

The night was cool with the chill of high mountain air, and there was no reason why the door should have been standing open.

Inside, the hallway was as dark as a tomb.

The young rough rider was about to dash into it when he suddenly checked himself.

"There is no knowing what may have happened here," he muttered. "San Pablo is noted for the crimes that have been committed about it. There is no knowing who may be lurking inside the house. I must be careful."

Swung around the waist of the young rough rider was a web belt filled with cartridges. At one side, hanging at the hip, was a Colts revolver with a long, steel barrel and a peculiarly made stock.

The young rough rider drew this out and spun the tumbler around to see that every chamber was loaded with a ball cartridge.

Then he stepped lightly into the house.

The place seemed to be filled with dark shadows, and the young rough rider slipped along through the darkness as silently as a shadow himself.

Above, on the upper floor, there sounded out the sudden creaking and banging of a door.

The boy stook stock-still. His revolver clicked softly as he pulled the hammer to the half cock. He listened.

Again came the creaking sound and the bang. Again, after another interval, it sounded a third time.

Ted Strong started forward once more. He knew what had caused that sound.

A door was standing open upstairs in a chamber through which the wind was blowing.

It was the wind that was banging it heavily against the wall.

The window up there would not have been opened, the door would not have been swinging to and fro in that fashion, had not something out of the ordinary happened in the house.

As the young rough rider stepped along the hall, another sound came out of a door on the right.

It was a sound of a different nature.

There was no mistaking it—it was the groan of a human being in distress and pain.

The young rough rider knew the house. He had been in this room before.

He stepped noiselessly into the room, shut the door after him, and silently dropped the wooden catch in place that would keep the door from being opened from the outside.

Then he came to a standstill, listening again and striving to pierce the darkness with his eyes.

A moment later there was another groan.

The young rough rider had no difficulty in locating this sound. It came from the far corner of the room.

He was over there in an instant, on his knees, feeling with his hands for the form of the man who must be lying on the floor there.

He encountered the face, and head, and shoulders, and then, bending a little nearer, looked into it.

His eyes had become a little used to the darkness.

It is a well-known fact that no matter how one may try to exclude the light from a chamber there is always a certain amount of it there, and that if a person stays long enough in any place, no matter how dark, his eyes will ultimately become so accustomed to it that he can see almost as well as he can by daylight.

Ted had been long enough in this room to be able to make out the forms of objects with a little distinctness.

He could see enough of the form to make out who it was.

It was Gardner, the owner of the mine, the man whom he had come to see!

And his daughter, Alicia—where was she?

The house was quite still and deserted.

Ted leaned forward, grasped the figure on the floor and shook it.

"What's the matter, Gardner?" he said. "Pull yourself together, man!"

The only answer was a groan. There was a strange stiffness and rigidity about the figure that the young rough rider could not explain.

He stood up again and threw another glance about the chamber.

He could see much better now than before.

There was a lamp standing on the table, but before the young rough rider lit it, he passed over to the window, threw it open, and pulled close the heavy shutters that guarded every window in this lonely house.

After he had made fast the shutter, the young rough rider returned to the table and lit the lamp.

His previous experiences in the West had taught the boy the necessity of caution under all circumstances, and he knew that some outrage had happened in the house.

He could not be too careful.

As the rays of the lamp shone out and illuminated the room, the boy saw that all the furniture in it was in the greatest disorder.

It seemed a miracle, almost, that the lamp itself had escaped being thrown on the floor and broken.

The little table on which it stood was the only thing that had escaped the effect of a furious struggle that must have taken place there a short time before.

The other table was overturned and one of the legs was broken short off.

The chairs were scattered on all sides, some of them so broken that they looked more like a pile of kindling wood than anything else.

Even a few pictures that had been on the walls had been torn rudely down and trampled on the floor.

The rag carpet that had covered the floor was torn up, here and there, and cut as though with the stamping of heavy feet.

There were stains of blood on the floor and on the walls were the marks of bullets. A faint odor of powder smoke still clung to the place.

The young rough rider felt that a scene of carnage had been enacted there only a moment before.

In the corner where Ted had found him, lay Gardner, the owner of the house.

He was bound hand and foot.

His body was twisted into such a shape that it did not seem that he could still be alive.

There were stains of blood on his face and other bloodstains on the white shirt that his open coat and waistcoat exposed.

His face had the pallor of a corpse, and his eyes were wide open and staring.

He seemed to be absolutely unconscious, although there came from him, every now and then, a faint groan.

It was the work of a few seconds for the young rough rider to spring to his side, cut the ropes that bound him, and carry him to a couch that had been dragged out into the middle of the room.

Then the boy left him, darted outside and returned, a second later, with a canteen filled with water which he always carried at the pommel of his saddle.

He also brought his saddle bags.

Out of them he took a piece of soap, a roll of antiseptic gauze and a few simple appliances such as are used by army surgeons and nurses in giving first aid to the injured on the field of battle.

The skill with which the young rough rider worked showed that he was an adept in the dressing of wounds.

He bathed the man's head and exposed a grazing cut on the side of the temple, as well as another scalp wound at the back.

It did not take the young rough rider long to clip away the hair from around the latter cut.

Then he washed them both and bound them up with the gauze.

During this operation, Gardner never stirred.

His eyes still remained wide open, and an occasional groan came from his lips. He seemed to have lost his senses and the power of moving.

The fact that his eyes were staring open made his appearance all the more terrifying.

The young rough rider knew that he must have received some severe nervous shock to have put him in this condition.

He next turned his attention to the wound on the man's body.

He tore open his shirt and found that a bullet had entered near the armpit.

It had come out at the back, so that there was little to be done save to wash the wound and stanch the bleeding.

The young rough rider knew that if this wound had not cut one of the ligaments or sinews it would not be fatal.

When he had finished dressing the wounds and had arranged Gardner's clothing so that he would be more comfortable, the young rough rider stood up and looked at him.

He was breathing more easily now, and Ted spoke to him.

"What has happened?" he said. "Where is your daughter?"

The words fell on deaf ears.

Gardner still stared at him open-eyed, but said nothing at all.

"Where is Alicia?" said the young rough rider, naming the man's daughter in the hope that the name might arouse the wounded man out of his stupor.

Still there was no response.

"I'll have to search the whole house," said Ted. "If they have found her, they probably have taken her away with them by this time. I have heard no sounds in the house, and I can find a candle here to light my way through the rooms upstairs. This man may have recovered consciousness sufficiently to speak to me when I get back."

The young rough rider found a candle in a closet and lit it.

Then, after casting a last look at the man who was lying on the couch, he took his revolver in one hand, the candle in the other, and started upstairs.

The result of his search turned out to be very much as he had expected it to be.

One glance at the room he entered first had told him that the place had been ransacked by robbers, and the young rough rider did not have any hope that they had failed to go through all the rooms in the house.

He found that the condition of the place upstairs was much the same as he had found it down below.

It looked as if a struggle had gone on here as well as on the ground floor.

The room that Alicia, the daughter of the unconscious man, had occupied, was in as great disorder as the rest of the house.

The door leading to this room bore evidences that it had been forced open.

The young rough rider wore a very grave face when he noted this fact.

After making perfectly sure that there was no one except Gardner and himself in the house, he turned and went downstairs to the room where he had left the man.

Gardner was still lying on the couch where he had left him, but a change had taken place in his appearance.

His eyes were closed, but he opened them as the young rough rider entered the room.

There was the light of intelligence shining in them now. They did not have that blank look that they had worn before.

The young rough rider drew close, for he knew that Gardner could now talk to him intelligently.

CHAPTER II.

GARDNER'S STORY.

Ted Strong bent over the wounded man and looked into his face.

"Don't get excited," he said. "You are in the hands of a friend. Tell me all that has happened."

"Who are you?"

The words came from Gardner's lips as though he had just awakened from a dream.

"I'm the young rough rider. Don't you know me?"

"I know you now. But you should have come sooner. The title deeds are gone."

"And your daughter——"

This question was all that was needed to arouse the wounded man thoroughly, and the young rough rider had put it to him with that intention.

Gardner sprang into a sitting posture, his eyes flashing.

"My daughter!" he cried. "Alicia! It was she they really came for. What has become of her?"

"I can't find her."

"Then she is in their hands, in the hands of those villains who attacked me and left me for dead."

Gardner would have started to his feet had not the young rough rider restrained him with a strong arm.

"Steady there!" said Ted. "Sit where you are for a

moment. You are wounded in two places. If you get yourself excited it will only endanger your life."

Gardner sank back on the couch with a groan.

"My life!" he said. "What do I care for that? My daughter is gone! She is in the hands of those villains. She was the only thing that made life worth living for me."

"Brace up!" said the young rough rider. "Try and pull yourself together. If you don't do it on your own account, do it on account of your daughter, Alicia. She has been taken away, and if you want her out of the hands of those who have taken her, get your wits together and tell me all that you know about it. I'll start out on the trail of these outlaws just as soon as I know what has happened."

These words produced a great effect on Gardner.

He controlled himself, and after a great effort spoke.

"I am glad that you are here at last," he said. "If anyone can get my daughter out of the hands of those villains it is the young rough rider. Are you sure that she is not in the house?"

"Sure."

"Then they have run off with her."

"Who were they?"

"The leader of the band was a Russian, a large man with a black beard. I knew him. I had seen him before. He had been here and tried to induce me to sell the mine to him."

"Count Platoff?"

"Count Platoff—that is the man."

"Why, he is the Russian whose brother was an outlaw leader. He had something to do with an attack on your house before. He was hurt in a fight at the bridge and fell into the water. Everyone thought that he was drowned."

"They thought that he was, and no great search was made for him. But a few days ago he appeared in San Pablo again. A Russian servant of his had dragged him out of the water."

"Was he not put in jail for the former attempt that he made to carry off your daughter?"

"No; there are others in jail for that. There was no way of proving that Platoff had anything to do with it. He came around a few days later and tried to buy the mine. He said that he wished to purchase it for the Russian Government. At the same time, he looked at Alicia in a way that I did not like."

"And Alicia?"

"Would have nothing whatever to do with him. She hated him."

"You refused to sell the mine to him?"

"I refused to entertain any propositions of his at all. I said that already I had made arrangements with you for the sale of the silver mine."

"What did he say?"

"He left here in a great rage. He swore that he would have the mine whether I was willing or not, and that I would pay dearly for having opposed his will. He said that he would have my daughter, too, and carry her away with him to Russia."

"What did you say?"

"When he began to talk that way I was angry. I took down the shotgun that hung over the fireplace and ordered him out of the house. I told him never to come back again.

"He went. His face wore an expression of the blackest rage that I ever saw on a human countenance."

"That was when?"

"Yesterday. This evening—or, rather, this afternoon, I was sitting in this room reading. I was on my guard more or less, but I never thought that the house would be actually attacked, and that in broad daylight.

"My daughter was upstairs.

"She was arranging something about the house.

"I could hear her singing there. I was listening to the sound and thinking that it would not be long before I could leave this place. I intended to do so, you know, with the money I received when I had sold the mine. I had planned to take Alicia to the East and to Europe, where she would have proper surroundings. I was thinking of this when there was a sudden noise at the door. Before I could rise to my feet, three or four men burst in and threw themselves upon me. There was no chance for me to rise to my feet. There was no chance for any resistance. The attack had come without the slightest warning."

"There were three men, you say?"

"More than that, although three dashed in ahead of the rest. Others ran upstairs."

"To where your daughter was?"

"Yes. I heard her scream."

"But you could do nothing?"

"Nothing. I was on the floor with three men holding me. They bound me hand and foot."

"Was it then that these shots were fired?"

"No; some of them fired at me at the time, but they did not hit me. We struggled all over the room. I caught at the barrels of their revolvers as they fired."

"That accounts for the disordered appearance of the room."

"Yes."

"And your daughter?"

"I could hear them carrying her downstairs and outside. There seemed to be a number of horses there, although I could not see. I could hear a man giving orders."

"Platoff, the Russian who tried to buy the mine from you?"

"Yes; he came inside a moment later. Then became evident the reason why he did not shoot me at the first instead of having his men tie me up this way. He wanted the papers that would give a title to the mine, and he was afraid that he could not find them.

"He knew that I had hid them somewhere about the house, and he wanted me to tell him."

"And you told him?"

"After he had carried off my daughter? No! A thousand times no!"

"Did he find them?"

"I don't think so. I hope not. He told me that if I did not tell him he would kill me. He drew a revolver and fired at me—so close that the bullets hit all around me."

"Is that how he wounded you?"

"No; he tried various ways to make me tell. But none of his tortures would make me tell a word. He had his men trice me up by the arms. I fainted with the pain."

"The brute!"

"In the meantime his men were searching the house for the deeds."

"But they did not find them?"

"No; when I came to, it was nearly dark. One of his men told Platoff that the young rough rider was due here about this time. It seems that the Russian had a spy on your actions in Monterey who would report to him when you were going to start for San Pablo. He did not want to wait for you. He said that he wished to have the girl in a position of safety. He made a last desperate effort to get me to tell. But it was no use. His men were impatient. They said that they could get the girl out of the way and then ambush you when you arrived here."

"Oh! That is his plan. He intends to come back to look after me."

"I think that he spoke of taking you by surprise."

"He may receive the surprise himself. But go on."

"There is not much more to tell. Platoff was very angry when he saw that he would have to go. He said that he would have the satisfaction of killing me anyway. He drew his weapon, pointed it, and I heard the trigger click. I saw the spout of fire at the muzzle, and that was all. A great darkness came over everything. The next I remember was when you were bending over me."

"I found you here," said the young rough rider. "There is no doubt that he left you for dead. There was a wound on your temple which would have killed you had the bullet sped a thought to the right. That other wound in the shoulder would have finished you also if it had been a little lower. It would have struck the heart or the lungs. When I found you I would have thought that you were dead, only for the fact that you groaned. Now to see after these title deeds. There is no time to lose. Platoff will be back here any moment, and I want to be ready to receive him."

Gardner had fallen into a sort of a faint again, but when the young rough rider threw a few drops of water in his face he brightened up once more.

"Where were the papers hid?"

"In front of the fireplace—a loose plank."

In an instant Ted was on his knees in front of the fireplace, prying at the planks.

He soon found the loose one and managed to get the end of it up.

Underneath it, in a dark cavity, was a fat bundle of legal-looking papers bound with a red tape.

The young rough rider snatched them up, glanced at them and thrust them into an inner pocket.

"I have them," he said, leaping to his feet. "Now, we have not a minute to lose. We want to make ready for Platoff and his gang."

"Close doors and shutters? I cannot help you. I cannot move."

"I am not going to do anything like that. You don't have to move. There is a back room here with a curtain in front of it, is there not?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am going to wheel the couch in behind there and draw the curtain. They will not look for you there."

Ted acted so quickly upon his words that Gardner had no time either to agree or disagree with this proposal.

In an instant, the couch on which he lay was in an alcove cut off by the curtain.

The young rough rider drew a small revolver from an inside pocket and pressed it into his hand.

"There," he said. "You can defend yourself with that if necessary."

At that very moment there came to the sharp ears of the young rough rider a sound which the other did not hear.

It was the distant sound of hoofbeats.

Platoff and his party were coming back.

There was no time to lose.

The young rough rider hastily threw door and windows open after putting out the lamp.

Then he himself crouched down, revolver in hand, in the corner in which he had found Gardner.

In through the open windows floated the sound of muffled hoofbeats.

They could not have been heard by an ear less keen than the young rough rider's, but to Ted they were perfectly distinguishable.

CHAPTER III.

COUNT PLATOFF.

While the young rough rider had been busied as has been seen in Gardner's house, another party of horsemen had been making their way along the trail that led from the house into the wildest part of the mountains that lay to the west of San Pablo.

At the head of this party rode a heavy-set, stout man, with a black beard and something foreign-looking in his appearance.

Behind him rode two other bearded men, who kept their eyes fixed on him and seemed ready to obey his slightest command.

The man who rode in advance was Count Platoff.

He was a dissolute Russian nobleman who had heard of the silver that had been found at San Pablo, and had journeyed there in the hope of purchasing the mine for the Russian Government and getting a fat commission out of it himself.

He found that the young rough rider had got in ahead of him, but as he was short of money, having wasted a fortune in riotous living, he had hung about that wild country, hoping to get the mine by foul means if he could not get it by fair.

The mine was not the only thing that had held him there.

He had seen Alicia, Gardner's daughter, and had determined to carry her off to Russia with him if he could.

A short time before, Count Platoff's brother, who had been banished from Russia and who had since been living as an outlaw in the West, had been captured and sent to jail by the young rough rider.

His band had been broken up, but a great many of his followers had escaped the officers of the law.

Platoff, who had turned up again, as Gardner had said, after the hue and cry had blown over and the young rough rider, who had run down his brother, had left that part of the country, had gathered these men around him.

The two men who rode immediately behind him were Dmitri and Ivan, his two servants, who obeyed his every command and followed him as faithfully and with as little reason as two dogs would have done.

Behind them came a number of rough-looking frontiersmen who had been hired for work of this nature by the Russian and had been paid well for it.

Immediately behind Platoff and between the two servants rode Alicia, the girl whom the count had just carried off with him.

Her hands were bound behind her back, and one of the frontiersmen had tied her to the saddle in such a way that she was quite comfortable and still could not drop from it.

She could do nothing to guide the horse that she rode, for the bridle had been passed over the head of her horse and was held by Dmitri, who rode close alongside of her.

Both Dmitri and Ivan had served as Cossacks in the army of the czar.

Although brutal and stupid to the last degree, they were splendid horsemen, and this is a quality that wins a good deal of respect in the far West.

The girl saw that she had no chance of escape.

She knew Platoff by sight.

She had seen him often before, when he had tried to force his attentions on her.

She had always feared and disliked him.

Now she realized that she was in his power, and that her father, for all she knew, was lying dead in the desolated house that the Russian had left behind him.

She was weeping silently as she rode along between her two grim guards.

Her face was pale, and yet there was an expression of courage and determination in it that showed that no peril could daunt her.

She was a beautiful girl, slim and graceful of form.

The fact that her brown hair was disordered and hung down about her shoulders, and that her face was tear-stained, did not make her any less attractive in the eyes of the brutal Russian count.

As they rode along, he glanced back at her every now and then, with a leering smile that frightened her a great deal more than the grim silence of her two Cossack guards or the rough talk of the American outlaws who rode behind.

They rode for several miles at a brisk trot, through winding trails in the hills.

Although Platoff had not been in this country for a great while, he had made a point of learning it thoroughly, with the idea of carrying out his scheme of kidnaping the girl and stealing the title deeds to the mine.

He was leading the way at a brisk trot and the others jingled after him with very little talk.

At length they pulled up their steeds in front of an opening that seemed to lead clear down into the ground.

It looked like the shaft of a mine, only it was a slow slope, so that a horse could readily walk down.

A moment later, the party had entered this passage.

Alicia could not see where she was going.

Outside it had been pitchy dark. Inside it was darker still.

She could hear the hoofs of the horses sounding on the stone floor with a great noise and reverberation such as a horse makes when it is driven through a tunnel.

She could hear the jingling of spur and the crack of stirrup leather, but she had not the faintest idea of the direction in which she was going.

She had heard that there were strongholds in these hills

to which no one but Indians or outlaws had ever penetrated, and she knew that she must be in one of these.

Presently they were out of the tunnel or passage that had evidently taken them clear under the side of some hill.

She could tell this by the sudden increase of light and by a fresher, dryer feeling in the air.

Then she could see the stars twinkling in the sky above her, and knew that she was outdoors again.

In spite of her grief and despair, she looked about her with some curiosity.

She could see that she was at the bottom of some very deep, natural basin among the hills.

On all sides were tall slopes, their sides covered with grass and bushes, their tops covered with pines and firs.

The moon was just rising over the crests of these hills and casting its pale beams down into the basin.

By its light she could see the gleam of a little lake in the middle of the basin, and along its shores a group of cabins.

She had no time to observe much more than this. Her captors were dismounting on all sides of her and leading their horses away in various directions with a great jingle of trappings and a stamping of hoofs.

Platoff dropped to the ground, and, stepping to her side, cut the ropes that bound her to the saddle.

He held out his hand to assist her to dismount, but in spite of the fact that her own hands were tied behind her back, she avoided him and leaped to the ground herself.

She staggered a little, as she was stiff from her long ride, but she managed to keep her balance.

Platoff saw on her face an expression of loathing that deepened at his approach.

An ugly look came into his own eyes.

But he said nothing aloud.

He knew how to maintain an appearance of outward calm when he was raging inwardly.

"You turn up your nose at me, do you, pretty American?" he muttered, under his breath. "At me, a Russian nobleman of the blood! But we shall see. Ivan!"

He called aloud to his servant, who saluted military fashion.

"Take the lady to her quarters and see that she is made comfortable. Cut her bonds when she is inside."

Ivan saluted again, and a moment later had led the girl to a cabin at one side.

She followed him with a despairing feeling in her heart.

She saw that resistance or an attempt to escape would be worse than useless.

It would only arouse the brutal passions of the Russian and make him even the more to be feared.

Without knowing what she did, she followed the Cossack to the cabin.

He flung the door open and she stepped inside.

Then he suddenly reached forward and caught her by the wrist.

She screamed, but before the scream had left her lips he had stepped away and closed the door behind him.

Her hands were free now.

The Russian had simply severed the bonds that held them together, and he had done it so deftly that she had not realized what he was doing.

She stood still and looked about her.

The cabin, which had been kept ready for her, was not at all what one would have expected in a place like that.

It was comfortably, even luxuriously, furnished.

There were rugs on the floor—evidently of Turkish workmanship.

There was a hanging lamp suspended from a brass chain and shaded with a silken shade.

It cast a soft, red light over the cabin.

Around the walls were divans, piled high with Turkish cushions, and here and there were little, Turkish tabourettes or small tables.

On one of them was a Russian tea urn or samovar.

On another a tray with cups and saucers.

On the walls were one or two pictures, mostly engravings and chosen with excellent artistic taste.

The walls themselves were made of oaken planks, finished roughly, but having as artistic an effect as the most expensive paneling.

Platoff had been planning to take the girl to this place, and, as he was prepared to spend any amount of money to carry out his schemes and had brought a large amount of baggage with him to San Pablo, he had no trouble fitting the room up as has been described.

For a moment the beautiful, comfortable appearance of the interior made the girl forget her grief and forget that she had left her father lying, apparently dead, in his own house.

Then the realization of her position came back to her with redoubled force.

She threw herself down on one of the divans, buried her face in the cushions and wept.

She was still weeping when a hand laid on her shoulder caused her to start to her feet suddenly.

She had expected to see that it was Platoff who had stolen in on her, but it was a person who looked very different from the Russian count.

It was a man who must have stood almost six feet six in his shoes, and who was broad for his height.

He was dressed in an ordinary pair of buckskin chaps and a blue shirt very much the worse for wear.

There was a belt of cartridges at his waist, as well as a revolver that was big enough to fit the man himself.

She had thought, after her first start, that this must be one of the outlaw followers of Platoff, but a second glance at his countenance told her that it was not the face of an outlaw or bad man of any kind.

It was an enormous face, quite in keeping with the enormous figure of the man, and it was very much lined with the wind and weather.

But there was an expression of good humor about the mouth and an honest twinkle in the blue eyes that looked frankly down into hers, that made her trust this giant instinctively.

"Who are you?" she said, recoiling sharply from him, so that she sank down on the divan.

"Lady, me name is Don Train," said the giant. "Pleased ter have met yer, although I'm a little surprised, as ther lobster said ter ther cook when she dropped him inter ther boilin' water."

"One of Platoff's men?"

"Platoff! Platoff? I never heard of ther gent, let alone met him. What is he, anyway?"

"He's a Russian who is at the head of a gang of outlaws here."

For a moment Alicia thought that this big man was crazy.

He whistled softly and began to do a sort of jig about the floor without making very much noise.

Then he threw his sombrero on the ground and stamped on it two or three times.

"Jest like yer, Don Train!" he exclaimed. "Yer've gone an' done it ag'in! I allers know'd yer was a fool."

Alicia moved nervously away from him.

She had not seen this giant when she entered the cabin, and she had not heard the door open.

He was so big that he seemed to fill the whole place.

Seemingly, he was too big to be indoors at all.

Every movement of his big figure brushed some part of his garments against something in the room.

The two little tables were upset, and the samovar fell clanging on the floor.

The man picked it up, set it in place, and looked at it with a very puzzled expression on his huge countenance.

"What kind of a dog-goned place is this yere, anyways?" he said.

Then he looked up at Alicia.

He could see the expression of fear and wonderment on her face, and immediately his manner changed.

He looked at her with sympathy in his eyes.

"Miss," he said, "I've been through some of the remarkablest adventoors thet ever fell ter ther lot of man. As the scrambled egg said to the ham it was fried with, 'I'm all mixed up.' But don't be afraid of me, nohow. I'm Don Train, ther best cowboy thet ever come outer Texas, an' I never would do anythin' ter hurt a gal. In ther first place, will yer kindly tell me what you is doin' here? Yer says as how this is an outlaw place. If yer pardin me fer sayin' it, yer don't look like no outlaw that I ever seed—nor yet like none of ther picters I ever seed in ther papers of 'em."

"I'm a prisoner here. I was carried off from my father's house. He was killed——" The tears began to flow down Alicia's cheeks.

The sight of her crying threw Don Train into the deepest distress.

"Don't do thet, miss," he said. "Gol durn yer hide! I mean bless yer soul—stop it! Ther sight of a woman cryin' allers puts me on edge, as ther razor says about ther hone."

"I can't help it."

"Yer must. Ther ain't no need ter cry. I'll get yer outer here. I'm not no outlaw. I'm yer friend. I'll see you through all right, as the sailor says ter ther teliscope."

Alicia managed to dry her tears a moment later, and Don Train was evidently very much relieved.

"I see yer is puzzled as ter who I is and what I are doin' here," he said. "An' I'll tell yer. It's the queerest dog-goned thing that I wound up in this here place! Yer see, I was out on a sorter bat."

"A 'bat'!"

"A jamboree, yer know."

"A 'jamboree'?"

Neither of these words carried any meaning to the mind of the girl.

"I don't make myself understood," said Train. "But it was this way. I was a-workin' on a ranch up near Fresno, although I'm a Texan—ther Texas Giant, they calls me. I left ther ranch an' got a job as a giant in a circus. It was a cinch fer a while, but it got dog-goned flat, not doin' nothin' but sittin' around an' lettin' boys look at ye. So I skipped out an' fin'ly wound up at San Pablo. I had five hundred plunks in my pocket, an' there's a bar fer ther dispensation of good red likker in thet there town, an'——"

Train hesitated.

"And you became intoxicated?" said the girl, smiling a little now in spite of herself.

"Intoxercated! Thet is puttin' it kinder gol-durned mild! I got drunk an' stayed so fer three days. Then I loaded up with about five flasks an' started out fer a walk. I thort as how I needed exercise. I walked up an' up among ther hills, stoppin', every now an' then, ter take a drink. I didn't know where I was goin', but as I got ther last drink I suddenly seemed ter come to, sorter, an' look around an' see where I was. I was on the top of a gol-durned hill. How in ther heck I ever got there, I never know. It were too gol-durn steep fer me or any

man ter climb when he was sober. An' it were too dangerous. A sober man would have shore broke his neck. But I didn't.

"I had just come to, ter find myself on ther top of a goldinged narrer ridge of rock, when I fell. I slipped down inter some sorter stream. I was too drunk—beggin' yore parding, miss—ter notice very much, but I went bumpin' an' tumblin' down this yere stream till I fin'ly landed on a rock.

"I guess as how ther cold water must have sobered me up some, because when I looked around I could see as how I was in a place where I had never been before, and where I had no business ter be.

"I was on a rock in ther middle of a leetle lake in ther middle of a leetle basin surrounded by high hills. There was a stream flowing through a cleft in two of ther hills, and I guess as how I come down on thet there stream.

"I swum ashor' an' saw this yere cabin standin' here. This was jest about dusk, an' there didn't seem ter be nobody around. I went inside ther cabin, expectin' ter find some one there. It was empty, by gol, but it was filled with all this yere outlandish furniture, as if it had been already prepared fer some gel."

"I'm the girl it was prepared for."

"Ye are, by gum! an' ye come here against yer will, as the feller said ter ther single oyster thet he found in ther boardin'-house stew."

"Yes," said Alicia, who was interested in the giant's story. "And were you here when Platoff brought me in?"

"I was here, all right. When I come in I was so goldurned tired thet I didn't know where I was, an' didn't keer. I tumbled in behind one o' them there sofys. I guess I tried ter lie down on ther sofy, but I fell on ther ground. I had been havin' some considerable ter drink, as ther sailor said after spittin' out about three gallons of sea water after they rescued him from drownin'."

"And you were lying behind the sofa when I came in."

"Yep; I fell asleep where I fell. Ther sound of voices woke me up, an' then I saw you. An' from what yer tells me, yer in ther hands of a villain who wants ter abduct yer?"

"Yes, who has taken me away from my home and left my father wounded—something tells me that he is not dead."

"Well, lady, ye has struck ther right man. Don Train will come ter yer assistance better than anybody could. That's my strong point, as the limburger cheese said when they complained about the smell——"

At that moment the door opened and Platoff himself stepped into the room.

Count Platoff was every bit as much surprised as Alicia had been at finding this strange individual in the room which he had thought empty save for the girl. He showed his surprise in a different way.

"Who in —— are you?" he said, with an oath.

Don Train smiled at him in the most good-natured way in the world.

"My name is Don Train—otherwise known as the Texas Giant."

"You are not one of my men."

"Not by a darn sight."

"What are you doing here?"

"I was sleepin' here up ter a minit er so ago. Sence then I hev been talkin' ter this lady here."

"How did you get down here, anyway?"

"That's more'n I know. I sorter drifted in, as ther rat said when it found itself in a sewer."

Platoff stepped back and threw the door open.

"Here, boys!" he yelled. "We have a spy here."

Don Train did not wait to hear any more.

With a roar like that of an enraged bull, he sprang straight at Platoff and grabbed him by the throat.

As he shouted, Platoff had been drawing a weapon, but the Texas Giant had hold of him before he could level it.

After that he had no chance to use it, for Don Train grasped him by the wrist and twisted his hand backward, so that the revolver fell from his grasp.

The two clinched and rolled over on the floor, both fighting with the fury of madmen.

The Russian, like most of his race, was heavily built, and very strong, but, if anything, the Texan was more than a match for him.

They rolled over out through the door. Platoff calling for help all the while.

It did not take long for help to reach him.

Three or four of his men came rushing up and threw themselves on the Texan.

After that it was a short struggle.

Don Train was evidently weakened by the liquor that he had been drinking. The girl saw him overpowered, bound hand and foot and taken away. Platoff turned to her.

"I am going back to your house," he said. "I expect to find Ted Strong there. He will be in my power when I return."

CHAPTER IV.

PLATOFF FINDS MORE THAN HE IS LOOKING FOR.

When the young rough rider heard the noise of approaching horses, he was perfectly sure that it was Platoff and his men returning.

From what he had heard from Gardner, he understood that Platoff had devised a clever scheme to take him unawares.

He thought that the young rough rider would be thunderstruck when he discovered the condition of the house, and would remain there for a while, never thinking that the perpetrators of the outrage would return.

Ted did remain.

In that much he fulfilled the expectations of the Russian

But he did not remain for the reason that Platoff had supposed he would.

He remained because he felt that it was his duty to stand by Gardner to the last.

He knew that if Platoff discovered that he was still alive, he would not hesitate to shoot him down in cold blood.

This time there would be no mistake about his death.

Ted knew that Gardner would be utterly unable to defend himself in his weakened, nervous condition.

He knew that by surprising the Russian he would have a great advantage over him.

He never hesitated a moment or thought of the danger when the life of another human being was at stake.

He placed himself in much the same position in which the unconscious form of Gardner had been left.

He thought that in the darkness or in the flickering lights cast by any lanterns that the outlaws might carry, it would be hard to tell the difference between his form and that of the wounded man.

Besides, the Russian, thinking that he had left Gardner dead, would not look at him very closely.

He had fired twice at him point-blank, and there could be no doubt in his mind about his death.

The young rough rider did not have to wait long in the position in which he had placed himself.

The sound of hoofbeats which his trained ears had been able to distinguish stopped before it was loud enough for the average man to have heard it at all.

Then there was silence for a moment.

The young rough rider had been careful to leave the doors open just as he had found them when he came to the house.

He could see out through the open door of the room, beyond that through the hallway and through the front door that opened on the porch.

The moon had arisen by this time.

It flooded the porch with pale light.

Ted lay there, hearing not a sound, watching from his dark corner.

He saw a dark figure steal noiselessly onto the porch. Then another -then two more.

He could see them gathering about the door and waiting there.

A faint noise from outside the window told him that there were men gathering there also.

He felt sure that the house was being surrounded on all sides, and the occasional sound of a breaking twig that came to his straining ears, told him that the people who were hunting for him were moving cautiously about outside.

The young rough rider had stationed himself in the very last place where Platoff would look for him.

He watched the figures on the porch, and then he heard them whispering together.

At first they spoke in very low tones and peeped cautiously into the house, as though they expected the young rough rider to leap on them at any moment.

Their fearful attitude showed how greatly they respected the fighting abilities of the boy.

After they had whispered there for a moment, another, heavier, step sounded on the porch.

It was that of Platoff himself.

Ted could see his bulky figure.

He glanced around at his surroundings.

He did not seem to be as badly frightened as they were.

"Well," he said, "we have the house surrounded. We will have no trouble in getting him now."

He spoke in audible tones, so that the sharp ears of the young rough rider could catch the words.

"We have heard no sound," said one of the men.

"Perhaps he is not in the house," said another.

"He may have gone——"

"Or not come at all," suggested a third.

"Bah!" said Platoff. "You know not what you speak of. He is here. There is no doubt of that."

"We have seen no signs of him."

"And heard nothing of him."

"That makes no difference. I know that he is here. I ran across his horse. He thought to fool us, I guess."

"My horse!" muttered the young rough rider. "I thought that I had it hidden so that they would not find it."

The young rough rider had thought that the sight of his horse might tell Platoff that he was still in the house if he came there, and he had hidden it as well as he could in a clump of bushes.

But he had not been cunning enough to elude the eagle eye of the Russian.

Platoff knew that in fighting the young rough rider he was up against one of the most dangerous men in the West, and he was taking no chances.

He knew that it would not be like Ted Strong to leave the house so soon after discovering the murdered man—as the count thought Gardner—that had been left there.

Acting on this thought, he had searched the underbrush all around the house.

Finally the whinny of a horse had caught his ear.

This was a thing that the young rough rider could

not guard against, and it was the thing that made Platoff certain that he was in the house.

He found the horse and saw that it was saddled with a cow saddle such as the young rough rider used.

It had been placed there to get it out of the way and hide the fact that its owner was already in the house.

That was the conclusion Platoff came to.

His followers had been rather hoping that Ted had gone as they thought he had.

He was not a foe that they were particularly anxious to meet.

When they heard Platoff say that his horse was around, they decamped from the porch in lively time.

The Russian laughed at them as they scrambled down the steps.

"You fools!" he said. "If he were in a position where he could have fired at you, he would have done so long before this. Come back here."

"He's ther best shot in ther West!" growled one of the men. "I don't want him to make no mark outer me."

"That's right," echoed the others. "Ther young rough rider is too slick with his pistil fer us ter want him ter do any shootin' at us."

"He's an enemy to all you fellows. You are all members of the gang that he broke up. And yet you want to let him go, now that you have him in a corner here. Don't you want revenge on him? He has sent some of your pards to jail. He has sent my brother, who was leader of the band, to jail."

There was a growl of anger from the men.

The wily Russian knew how to work them up into a rage. He continued:

"You are afraid of him," he said. "That is what is the matter with you fellows. There are nine of you here, besides my two servants—Dmitri and Ivan—that is twelve in all, counting myself. There is one boy in this house. He is nothing more than a boy. He has chased you fellows away from San Pablo. He has put an end to your gang. He is alone here in this house. We know that he is here. And yet you are afraid to go in and tackle him. If you were men, instead of a lot of weak-kneed cowards, you would sail in and get revenge on the young rough rider."

There was another angry growl from the men, and they were beginning to crowd up on the porch once more.

"You're afraid," said Platoff. "But I will show you that I am not afraid of him. I want revenge on him. He put my brother in jail. I am a Russian, and I never forget. I want to take him alive to our stronghold. Then I will amuse myself with him. I have enough of the old Tartar blood in me to enjoy torturing him. I will capture him single-handed. You Americans boast of being a brave race. I will show that a Russian, when he wants revenge, can be braver than you. I will go in alone, since you are afraid."

This speech had just the effect that the Russian intended.

It inflamed the rage of the men to a fever heat.

It made them forget all about the deadly shooting of the young rough rider, all about everything, in fact, but their desire to kill him and secure revenge.

Ted himself had heard all this conversation, and he knew that if the men had been supplied with a lantern or light of any kind they would have produced it by this time.

The corner in which he was crouching was the darkest in the room, and he knew that Platoff, thinking that he had left a dead body there, would not be anxious to go very close to it.

A moment later Platoff led the way into the room.

A rat scurried away across the floor, making a scampering noise that the Russian and his followers thought at first was caused by the man they were looking for.

"There he is!"

"Fire at him!"

"He's behind the door, there!"

"After him, boys!"

"Look out, he'll shoot!"

These were the cries that filled the room.

Everyone imagined that the young rough rider was in a different spot.

Everyone leveled his weapon and fired blindly.

That wild explosion of firearms showed more than anything else how frightened they were of the young rough rider coming upon them unawares.

Some of them fired almost in each other's faces.

The room was lit up with the flashes of the weapons, and filled with the detonation.

The atmosphere was choking with powder smoke.

One man received a grazing wound in the cheek.

Another screamed out wildly that the young rough rider had shot him in the leg.

"Out of here—he's firing at us!" shouted one, making a dash for the door.

"We are caught in a trap!" shouted another. "Run!"

"Stand your ground, you fools," shouted Platoff. "There is nothing in this room but a dead body."

One man started to rush past the Russian, but he struck him a blow between the eyes with his fist and felled him to the floor.

The sight of this—for they could see it dimly by such moonlight as came in through the open window—did something to steady the nerves of the others.

They halted by the door, weapons in hand, ready to start off again at every sound.

"You fellows who were wounded were shot by each

other," said Platoff. "That fellow that lies there on the floor where I knocked him very nearly killed me. Pull yourselves together. There is nothing but a dead body in this room. That was a rat that you heard scamper across the floor."

"If there was more light, I wouldn't be skeered," said one of the men.

"I have some matches in my pocket," said Platoff. "I'll light up and show you this dark corner of the room. The young rough rider is in one of the rooms upstairs. I have left Dmitri and Ivan to watch the doors to see that he does not escape. They fear the bullets of the young rough rider less than they do me."

Platoff, as he spoke, approached the corner of the room in which Ted Strong was lying.

He could not make out the form, for, although the moon cast a ray of light across the front of the room, it was pitchy dark in the back part of it.

He was closer to the young rough rider than he knew, when he struck the match and started to peer about him.

But he saw nothing.

As the match was lit, a puff of wind had come from somewhere in front of him and put it out.

It was now Platoff's turn to start back in fear.

Like all Russians, he was superstitious.

He thought that it was the ghost of the man that he had killed that had blown out that match.

Uttering a wild exclamation in Russian, he lit another match.

As he held it in his trembling hand he tried to peer forward into the dim corner of the room in which he thought the corpse of a murdered man lay.

His followers, with pale faces, looked over his shoulders.

The flickering light from the match was shining in their faces so that they could not see past it.

All at once a puff of wind blew the match out again!

There was no window in that side of the room.

No one there had felt any wind in their faces.

It seemed as if some spirit had slipped close to the Russian count and snuffed out the match that was in his hand.

They all recoiled at once toward the front part of the room.

The count was now as much frightened as any of the others.

He had not been so much afraid of the young rough rider, but his superstitious Russian nature made him attach great importance to the fact that the match had gone out in his hand in that strange manner.

The fact that he was wealthy and had been well educated did not make his superstition or fear of ghosts any the less.

It was a part of his nature, and he was in every bit as great a state of panic as his two ignorant servants, Dmitri and Ivan.

While he and his followers were still clustered in a group, looking about them fearfully, there came a strange sound from one side of them.

It came from the side of the room in which there was a little alcove concealed by a curtain.

It was a long-drawn-out wail, like the cry of a lost spirit.

It was followed by another wail from the dark corner of the room that they had not dared to search.

These two cries were enough for the outlaws.

With wild screamings and scufflings they raced for the door, fighting with each other to get out.

The count did not try to check them this time.

He ran with the rest.

At the same time, there was a flash in the darkness, followed by a deafening report.

It was the weapon of the young rough rider which now spoke for the first time.

If anything had been wanting to frighten the outlaws through and through, this supplied it.

It was not one shot alone.

The young rough rider is noted for the rapidity of his fire.

This time he emptied his weapon as fast as his finger would work the trigger.

The room was filled with the noise and the powder smoke and the yells of the outlaws.

They tumbled headlong toward the door.

The young rough rider had given them a surprise, indeed.

CHAPTER V.

BESIEGED.

The young rough rider had a huddled group of figures to fire into.

He could see them in an indistinct mass in the moonlight, and he did not stop to take any particular aim.

He knew that every bullet would tell in frightening his foes whether it hit one of them or not.

While he was firing, another flash of fire appeared in the darkness.

Another pistol began to speak.

It came from the alcove where Ted had left Gardner lying on a couch.

Ted knew that the wounded man had recovered sufficiently to take part in the surprise that he had planned.

He knew that it had been Gardner's long-drawn-out wail that had helped with the cries that he had uttered himself to frighten the outlaws.

The firing only lasted a very short time, but while it lasted, the front room of Gardner's house was like a nightmare.

It was lit up by the flashes of the two revolvers.

The air was choked with the powder smoke, and the noise, between the yells of the frightened outlaws and the racket they made scrambling for the door, was deafening.

It was silent a moment later, and the outlaws were scrambling outside, with two of their number, who had been wounded in the legs, making the best of their way out on all fours.

Ted was on his feet now, and rushed to one of the windows.

He could see his foes scattering in all directions.

He could see the figure of Platoff waving them back.

The Russian had evidently gotten over his superstitious scare.

"Get back!" he yelled to the others. "They are not ghosts! That is a trick of the young rough rider to frighten us. Ghosts do not shoot with revolvers. Those bullets that we heard sing past our eyes were not ghostly."

Some of the men paid attention to him and gathered around him.

Ted knew that there was not a moment to lose.

He would have fired at Platoff, but his revolver was empty.

He closed the shutters of the window and dashed to the door and closed it.

"Gardner!" he cried. "Where are you?"

"Here," came the voice of the owner of the house.

"You are able to move about now?"

"Yes; I grew stronger while I lay there. I can use my hands and I can walk."

"Get the shutters closed in front of all the windows. Those fellows will be back in an instant."

Gardner needed no second command.

There were heavy, wood shutters guarding every window in the house, for just such an emergency.

They had been wide open when the young rough rider had arrived there, and he had left everything just as he found it, in so far as that was possible.

Now, with Gardner to assist him, he ran from window to window.

Gardner barred the door with heavy bolts.

He acted none too quick.

Just as he had shot the last bolt in place, there was a rush of feet on the porch and a number of men threw themselves against it.

The door shook with the impact.

"Bang at it all you want," said Gardner. "That door was made strong to stand off a rush like that. You can't get it down unless you use a battering-ram."

In the meantime, Ted had closed the shutters in front of all the windows except one.

Already a scattering burst of shots rang out, and a number of bullets buried themselves in the shutters.

As he dashed toward the last window, a pistol was fired almost in his face.

The bullet sang close over his head.

Ted darted forward, nevertheless, knowing that their only possible chance of standing off the attack was in having all the shutters closed.

As he reached out to draw in the shutter, the man who had fired at him grasped him by the wrist.

It was Dmitri, the Russian servant of the Count Platoff.

He was a man of tremendous strength, and he tried to climb in the window, clinging fast to the arm of the young rough rider all the while.

For a moment it seemed as if he would accomplish his purpose.

The young rough rider was unarmed.

He needed both his hands to close and fasten the shutters, and he had thrown his weapon on the floor.

Dmitri got one knee on the window sill and grappled at the throat of the young rough rider.

Caught in his embrace, which was like the hug of a bear, Ted could look out and see others close behind him Ivan, his fellow servant, and the Count Platoff himself.

They were reaching up to climb in the window after Dmitri.

But they did not take into account the great strength and courage of the young rough rider.

Just as Dmitri seemed to have choked the fight out of him, just as he seemed to be on the point of getting into the room, the fist of the young rough rider landed on his forehead, rather low, down between the two eyes.

It landed with all the force that Ted Strong could put into a blow.

It was instantly effective.

The Russian's head rolled back on his shoulders.

His grip at the throat of the boy relaxed.

A moment later he was raised high in the air and hurled bodily at the two men who were swarming up below.

He landed on them squarely.

All three fell in a heap on the ground.

At the same time, the shutter was slammed closed and the young rough rider shot home the bolts that fastened it on the inside.

"All safe now," muttered the young rough rider. "I guess that fellow that I hit will remember it for a little while."

Gardner was close behind him.

He could not see the young rough rider, for the room, with the shutters closed, was as dark as pitch.

But he could tell from his voice where he was standing.

"All the shutters are closed," he said. "There are loopholes in them to fire through, but they are high up, so that we can be sure that they will not reach them or fire through them from the outside."

"Then I guess it will be safe to light a light."

"That lamp that was on the table is smashed. One of the bullets hit it."

"Perhaps you can find a candle."

Gardner groped around in the dark for a moment or so. At last he found a candle and lit it.

The little light that it cast seemed a good deal in the eyes of these two, who had become quite used to the darkness by this time.

They looked about.

The room had appeared disorderly before, but now it was still more so.

There were several bullet holes around the door where the shots of the young rough rider had struck.

On the floor there lay the smashed lamp and a lot of broken furniture that the outlaws had overturned in their flight.

There were traces of blood on the floor.

Ted pointed to them.

"Some of these fellows were pretty badly wounded," he said. "There's the trail where one of them had to crawl away."

"And here are more blood stains. I suppose that I acted right in joining in with you that time."

"Just right. Although, I did not expect you to do it. When I found you, you were so weak that I thought you would be able to do nothing."

"I was weak. But after you dressed my wounds I found that my strength was returning a good deal. The weakness was caused more by the shock than the wounds."

"Neither of the wounds will prove serious, then, in spite of the fact that Platoff thought that he had left you dead."

"No; I did not know what your plans were. I knew where you were crouching. I heard the others scuffling about. Then I saw through a fold of the curtain that you blew out the match. A moment later I heard the first wail that you gave to frighten them."

"And you understood, then, that I wanted to scare them and then fire at them while they were good and scared."

"Yes; but I did not understand why you let them into the house at all. It seems to me that you had time before they came to close the shutters and fortify the place."

"Yes, I had time to do that. But I decided not to do it. I knew that if Platoff saw that the place was fortified he would know that I was on my guard. He would be very cautious about exposing either himself or his men."

"Yes—and you wanted him to expose them."

"I wanted to get a few shots at them. That's why I let them in here. The more I put out of business the better, for I know that Platoff will fight me as long as he has a man under him—alone, in fact, to the death."

"And that was simply a plan to entice them in here and fire at them."

"Exactly. I knew that they would besiege the place, and I wanted to disable as many as possible before the siege began. In order to avoid killing them, I fired low, at their legs. I think I laid about three on the waiting list."

"I did not fire low," said Gardner, grimly. "They are the villains who ran away with my daughter. I shot to kill."

"You did not kill any. You wounded one man in the hand, however, so that he is no use at all."

"I did not see that. That makes four that are disposed of. There are about fifteen in all."

"Twelve—I counted them. There were ten in the room, two left outside. The outside men who were to watch that I did not escape were the Russian servants of Platoff. He can trust them better than he can any of the others."

"That makes eight of them still. Eight against two. The odds are terrible. And yet you do not seem to be frightened in the least."

"The odds are not so bad as they look. As long as we fight back at them, they cannot break into the house. It is too strong for that, and the loopholes are well arranged, so that they command the doors."

"They do not know how many there are in the house."

"No; they have had a big scare thrown into them, and they will be cautious. Do not fire at them till they come close and you are sure of them. We want to tempt them out of the cover which they have taken and get a shot at them."

While he had been talking the young rough rider had been looking out of the loopholes at both sides.

The moon was shining brightly, but there was no one in sight.

Platoff and his followers had realized that it was necessary to lay a regular siege to this house.

They had taken shelter in the undergrowth that lay on all sides.

While Ted had been looking over the situation outside, Gardner had been taking two or three rifles down from the walls where they hung.

He also produced a box of cartridges, and the two beban to load, each keeping a watch the while, at the loopholes which were just on a level with their eyes.

As the house was small and the loopholes were placed on the opposite corners, it was easy to see right around it from them.

"You see," said the young rough rider, "that the shrub-

bery has been cleared away from the house for a distance of thirty or forty yards on all sides."

"I was advised to do that by an old frontiersman," said Gardner.

"It was good advice. In order to get at the house they will have to leave their shrubbery and cross it. Are you a good shot?"

"Fair."

"Well, you will have to do your best now. They will try to make a rush across that space, like as not. You must fire just as soon as you see a man appear, and keep on firing. You take care of that side. The open space is wider there and there is less chance for them. They will not try to rush while the moon is shining as bright as it is. But, as soon as it clouds up, look out for them."

A moment later a cloud drifted across the face of the moon, and it became darker.

Ted leaned forward and fired through the loophole.

The siege was on in earnest.

CHAPTER VI.

FIRE!

Ted had seen a dark figure appear from the shrubbery.

Another had appeared behind it, and a third.

The young rough rider had fired with the quickness of thought.

Three whiplike reports had rung out.

The first man had pitched headlong on the ground.

The second had slid down on his knees and then fallen over on his face.

The third had dropped his weapon and plunged headlong into the underbrush once more.

The young rough rider sent a shot after him, and a scream of agony told him that the bullet had found a mark.

He could see none of the outlaws, but he knew that they must have been clustering about that point for a rush.

He fired into the bushes, three times more.

There were cries of pain, and a waving of the bushes told him that the outlaws were scattering.

The young rough rider smiled grimly.

"No more attacks from that quarter for a little while," he muttered. "I wonder how Gardner is getting on."

"Here they come!" yelled Gardner, firing at the same moment.

Ted left his side of the house for a moment.

He knew that it was safe to do so.

Snatching up a fresh rifle and throwing the one that he had just emptied on the ground, he ran to the side of the wounded man.

It was clear that Gardner was not anything like as good a shot as the young rough rider.

He had fired three times, but still he had not hit two men who were dashing toward the window.

They were very close to it when Ted got there.

He thrust his rifle through the loophole.

One of them leaped up and grasped the barrel in his hand.

His weight did not pull it down, as he had expected.

The young rough rider had been expecting tactics like this, and was bearing down on the butt with all his strength.

At the same time he pulled the trigger and the fellow who had grasped it fell to the ground, shot through the palm of the right hand, which had been over the muzzle of the weapon.

Ted shifted his rifle and aimed at the other man, whom Gardner had missed again.

This fellow carried a torch in his hand and a bundle of dry wood.

He was lighting the wood against the side of the house when the weapon of the young rough rider spoke.

He rolled over on the ground.

In the meantime, Gardner had been standing trembling behind the young rough rider.

He saw that the attacking force could have rushed past his fire in very short order.

"That is wonderful," he said, as he saw the steadiness and speed with which the boy disposed of his foes.

"Wait a minute," said Ted. "Swing open the shutter."

"Swing open the shutter? Are you crazy?"

"I must stamp out that fire. The torch has kindled that wood. They are planning to burn the house over our heads. Keep firing out the window and help me up when I have stamped out the flame. There will be no attack from the other side, but they will keep up a fire at this side if the shutters are opened."

As Ted spoke, he flung open the shutters and dropped outside.

The wood that had been dropped at the side of the house had kindled, although the fellow that had done the work had been shot a moment later by the young rough rider.

Ted saw that he must stamp this out before it was fairly alight or there would be no hope for the house.

It was built of wood throughout, and it was dry and seasoned, so that it would burn like tinder.

What he was doing was a terribly perilous thing.

The outlaws who were under cover were no doubt waiting for an attempt of this kind.

They had their rifles trained on the spot, ready to fire should anyone open the shutter.

But the very daring of the young rough rider seemed to dumfound them for a moment.

He was down on the ground, kicking the burning embers away from the house, before a shot was fired.

Then bullets sang all about his ears.

His work was done, however.

He seized hold of the window sill and swung himself up.

At that moment the man whom he had shot through the hand leaped from the ground and grasped the young rough rider by the ankle.

Ted felt his hold breaking.

The bullets were hitting in the woodwork close about him, and puffs of smoke arising from the bushes told him where the outlaws were firing.

Gardner came to his rescue.

Reaching out of the window, he fired down at the fellow who was clinging to the young rough rider.

He let go his hold and fell to the ground, shot through the shoulder.

At the same time the young rough rider swung himself inside and slammed the shutters closed.

Two bullets had cut through his hat.

Another had nipped a piece out of his sleeve.

But he himself had not been hit.

There was no time to lose.

The young rough rider expected that another attack would follow from the other side.

He darted across the room and looked out through the window.

He saw at a glance that he was too late.

The outlaws had edged up to this side, as well as the other, and when the young rough rider looked out he saw a column of smoke rising in the air.

Looking down, he saw that a fire had been built against the side of the house.

Had there been any use in attempting to stamp this one out, as he had done with the other, he would have tried it.

But a glance showed him that it would be useless.

The wood had been piled up high against the side of the house, away on one side of the window, and had been lighted so that the flames ran along the woodwork

To reach it, the young rough rider would have to leap from the window and run ten feet along the side of the house.

And when he reached it he would have been able to do nothing to stamp it out.

Already the flames had taken hold on the wood of the house.

There was a great column of smoke arising to the sky, and a great snapping and crackling sound filled the air.

The roof was on fire, and sparks from the burning eaves were blowing down to the ground on all sides.

The wall below this burning section was in flames as the young rough rider looked at it.

Ted drew back with a serious look in his eyes.

The men who had made the attacks on both sides had gone back to cover, except two who were either too badly wounded to move, or dead.

It was evident that Platoff had determined to burn him out.

He went to the other loophole and glanced out at the bushes.

On one side he detected the heads of several horses, and he knew that must be the point where the outlaws kept their steeds.

If he had only two of these horses, he would not have hesitated to run the gantlet.

But on foot and with Gardner wounded as he was, it seemed hopeless.

"Is there no entrance to this house save the two doors?" he asked, turning to Gardner.

"There is the cellar."

"It opens outside also?"

"It has an old entrance that I never used."

"Show it to me. There is no use trying to hold out here any longer."

What the young rough rider said was evident.

The noise of the crackling flames outside was louder and the room was filled with smoke.

Even had there been water in the house, there was no way of fighting the flames.

Gardner had given up hope completely.

He saw that his house was doomed, and he did not think that he had any chance for his life.

But the words of the young rough rider seemed to inspire him with a sort of confidence.

Taking the candle in his hand, he led the way out of the room, now filled with smoke, downstairs to a cellar that stretched underneath the house.

"There is the way out," he said, pointing to a flight of steps, or, rather, a ladder that ran up to a trapdoor. "That opens out back of the house."

"It opens out pretty near the point where they have those horses," said the young rough rider.

He stood for a moment, glancing around the cellar, evidently planning.

"There is no use," said Gardner. "I am sorry that I have led you into this hole. It would have been better if you had left me to die by myself."

"It would have been nothing of the sort," said Ted. "What is in those barrels there? I mean those smaller ones at the further end."

"Oh! Ammunition of various kinds."

"Ammunition, eh! Is there any loose powder there?"

"Two kegs. I used to do a whole lot of shooting with a shotgun, and I filled my own cartridges."

"That's the stuff. The kegs of powder. We are all right."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the powder will save us."

"What can you do with loose powder?"

"A whole lot. I can blow up the house with it."

"And have us die with it?"

"Not by a long shot. We will be here in the cellar and we will rush out through that door at the moment of the explosion. The outlaws will be too much taken up with the explosion to look for us."

While the young rough rider had been speaking, he had rolled one of the kegs over to the stairs.

Now he raised it in his arms as lightly as if it had been empty and started up the stairs with it.

"Bring the other one up," he said to Gardner. "We will use them both."

But Gardner, even when he was at the best of his health and strength, could never have done what the young rough rider was doing.

Now, weakened as he was with his wounds and the excitement which he had gone through, it was all that he could do to roll the other keg over to the foot of the steps.

A moment later, however, the young rough rider ran down the steps again.

"Come upstairs and keep a lookout while I fix things," he said, picking up the second keg of powder.

There was something in the energy and courage of this boy that seemed to be infectious.

Gardner had no very definite idea of what it was that the young rough rider had planned to do, and the blowing up of the house seemed a hare-brained thing at the best.

But it was evident that Ted had confidence in his ability to get away from the outlaws, and this confidence communicated itself to Gardner.

He followed the young rough rider upstairs, and, taking a rifle, watched alternately at the two loopholes.

There was little need of such a watch being kept.

The outlaws had already had good experience of the shooting of the young rough rider.

They believed that there were at least three people in the house.

They knew that they had it surrounded, and that all they had to do was to wait until the inmates were driven out by the heat and the smoke.

They could then pick them off as they came out.

This would give them what they wanted—the death of the young rough rider—without any more risk on their part

They had all taken to cover again, and when Gardner looked out through the loophole into the moonlight, the scene seemed so quiet and deserted that the fighting was like a nightmare from which he had just awakened.

There was the crackling of the flames, however, the heat and smoke that now filled the rooms, to remind him that it was no dream, but the deadliest and grimmest reality that could be imagined.

In the meantime, the young rough rider had been busy with his two kegs of powder.

He had placed them at the two ends of the room, and he piled all the furniture he could find about them, so that the force and violence of the explosion might be the greater.

Then he took a little powder from each of the kegs, moistened it a little, and set to work making a fuse, using strips of dry paper that he picked up in the house for the purpose.

Each fuse went into the bunghole of one of the kegs, and the head of each keg was driven firmly on and all the apertures closed up.

Gardner had been watching these preparations.

He looked at the young rough rider in amazement.

"We have both got to die," he said, "and I do not suppose that it makes very much difference whether we die from the explosion or from the bullets of those villains out there. But do you know what you are doing?"

"I hope so."

"When that powder goes off it will go off with force sufficient to throw down half a block of city houses."

"Just about, I think," said Ted, still busy with the fuse.

"This house will be blown to atoms."

"I hope so; that's what I am planning for."

"And we will be destroyed with it."

"That's where we differ. I think not."

"There is no chance. The explosion will clean out the cellar as well."

The young rough rider stood up and brushed a few loose grains of powder from his clothes.

He had arranged the fuse to his satisfaction.

The heat in the room was unbearable now.

The house was afire overhead and smoke was pouring in at every crevice.

Little tongues of fire appeared on the inside of the room at the bottom of the walls and around the crevices of the door.

The heat was suffocating and choking and the smoke half obscured the dim light of the candle.

"The explosion will strike downward, I have no doubt," said the young rough rider. "But I noticed that the portion of the cellar under the trapdoor is outside of the foundation walls, and not under the house at all. We will be safe there, and the sooner we start the better.

There is going to be something doing in this room in a very short time."

As the young rough rider spoke he picked the candle from the table and touched the flame to the fuse.

"Now," he said, with the greatest coolness. "I think we will start for our little cyclone cellar under the trap door. We have about three minutes to make it."

Gardner needed no invitation to hurry.

He was down in the cellar before the boy had finished speaking.

Ted followed him at a more leisurely gait, casting a last glance at the fuse.

The spark of fire was running along the fuse fast toward the powder kegs.

CHAPTER VII.

THE EXPLOSION—THE DASH FOR LIBERTY.

While these events which have been just narrated were taking place inside the burning house, Platoff was crouching in the shrubbery a short distance away.

He was well under cover, but he was in a position where he could see that the young rough rider did not attempt to escape from the house without running a gantlet of rifle fire.

And there would be no escape from this fire.

Platoff had instructed his men that, no matter who should come from the house, they were all to continue to fire at the young rough rider until he dropped.

"He is more dangerous than ten others," said the Russian. "He is the one upon whom we seek revenge. It is he who has fought us off this way. No one else could have done it."

By this time, the followers of the Russian count were every bit as anxious for the death of Ted Strong as he was himself.

They had suffered terribly from the fire of the young rough rider.

Platoff was the only man there who had not been injured in some way.

The others bore eloquent testimony in their appearance to the fighting ability of the boy they were besieging with the odds of twelve to two against him.

Dmitri had been stunned with the blow that the young rough rider had struck him, and had a great, black-and blue mark on his forehead.

Ivan, the other Russian serf, had a cut on his head.

This had been made by Dmitri's foot when he was hurled down upon him from the window by the young rough rider.

Besides this, Ivan had a bullet wound in his arm.

None of the outlaws were killed, but some of them were permanently disabled, so that they would be no more use in the fighting.

All of them were suffering from wounds.

Two men were shot through the legs, so that they could not walk.

They had been dragged out of the zone of fire by their companions.

One had nearly all the fingers of his right hand shot away, as well as a bullet wound in the side that put him out of the fighting altogether.

Another had a broken collar bone, and a third had his arm broken by a revolver bullet so that it hung useless at his side.

Those who were not injured seriously were wild for revenge.

They watched with hungry eyes the fire that was creeping around the walls of the house, wrapping it closer and closer in the flames.

The moon was setting, but its waning light was not needed to illuminate the scene.

The fire cast a light all about that was as bright as day.

Clouds of sparks soared up to the skies, and the roar that came from the flames filled the ears of the outlaws.

"They cannot live much longer in that," said Platoff, licking his lips in glee. "The young rough rider is brave, but he cannot face that much longer."

"He'll be burnt ter a crisp if he does," growled one of the outlaws.

"He won't face it. He will come out here in the plain light, where we will get a shot at him. Boys, are your rifles all loaded "

"Trust ter us," said the fellow who had spoken before. "We'll attend ter ther young rough rider, all right. After what he's done ter us, he has ter die. May I never shoot straight again if I miss my shot at ther young rough rider."

"Ah! That is well. You also pant for revenge on him."

"You bet we do. And we'll git it, too."

"We are smoking him out of his hole the way hunters smoke a rabbit or a fox out of their hiding places. I have often done it in Russia. But never have I enjoyed a fox or rabbit hunt as much as I will shooting the young rough rider."

"The house is goin' quick; it cain't last much longer."

"You are sure that the door there is the only way out of it?" asked Platoff.

"What other way kin there be? There don't seem no cellar entrance. In fact, I don't believe there is a cellar under the durned house."

"Well, watch that door."

"The hull top floor is afire now. The flames must be

a-burstin' inter the room where they was a-firin' from. It won't take much longer now."

"Steady, boys; ready to fire at the young rough rider the moment the door swings open. Do not waste a shot."

The outlaws bent forward like hounds in the leash.

Seven rifles were pointed at that door.

Seven fingers were crooked about the triggers.

In a moment they expected the door to swing open.

Nothing human could live in that building much longer.

When it did open, the young rough rider would be met with a rain of death.

There would be no chance for him this time.

Not a word was spoken.

Every eye was glued on the door.

And in that moment of strained suspense, the thing which the young rough rider had planned happened.

The first that the outlaws knew of it was when they saw the whole house rise bodily into the air.

It split in two and out of it belched a stream of fire that shot high above the tops of all the trees.

Then came the sound of the explosion.

It was terrible.

The ground rocked with it; it was like the noise of great artillery, almost sufficient to split the eardrums of the people who heard it.

Such of the outlaws as had been standing up or kneeling were thrown flat forward on their faces.

They had no idea for the moment of what had happened.

Their eyes were scorched and blinded with the great flash that had come from the explosion.

They were deafened with the noise of it.

Then there seemed to be a rain of fire.

Great logs of wood, part of the walls of the house, came tumbling down out of the air into which they had been blown.

They were flaming from end to end, and they landed like meteorites among the outlaws.

Whole heaps of débris, the ruins of the house, followed them.

No one could look up, for fear of being struck in the eye and blinded by a flaming mass of the wreckage that was flying about.

It was too much for the outlaws.

With wild yells of terror they ran this way and that, their eyes closed in their fear, not knowing where they went.

In the meantime, the horses which had been tethered a little nearer the house, broke the picket line and started off in all directions.

They were crazed with fear.

One of them started straight for the ruins of the house, which were still burning.

It would have plunged headlong into the fire and burnt to death had it not been stopped in an unexpected way.

A figure appeared, apparently out of the ground in front of it, grasped it by the bridle, and swerved it around.

It was the young rough rider, who had just emerged from the trapdoor which communicated with the cellar, and under which he had been lying in wait for the sound of the explosion that he had planned.

Behind him came Gardner, evidently bewildered, but ready to obey the commands of the young rough rider to the letter.

"Into the saddle with you, and hold fast," said the boy.

He himself was dragging at the bit of the horse, and was just managing to hold it still, partly by main strength and partly by an unusual power which the boy is able to exercise over dumb animals.

It did not take long for Gardner, in spite of the wound in his shoulder, to swing into the saddle.

Then Ted let go the rein.

He could scarcely have held the maddened horse any longer.

Away it went like the wind.

Gardner was clinging to its back and making no effort to guide it in the least.

But the young rough rider knew that he would stand a much better chance of getting away in safety than if he had tried to guide it himself.

The instinct of the horse would be a better guide, and the young rough rider had no doubt that Gardner would arrive at Monterey or some other town before morning.

He cast one glance at his flying figure, and saw him disappear among the bushes and off down the trail at a dead run.

The outlaws were taking no notice of him whatever.

Some of them were sprawled on the ground; others were running blindly for cover.

Ted looked around for another horse for himself.

The picket line had been broken and there were heaps of burning embers lying all about.

The horses had run madly away in all directions—all except one.

This animal had started to run, but had one of its legs tangled in the picket line so that it tumbled and sprawled on the ground.

Ted saw it and ran over toward it.

It was the work of a minute to loosen the rope in which it was tangled and pull away the coils in which it was bound.

Ted was engaged in this when a figure leaped up from the ground and rushed at him.

It was Platoff.

He had been lying there where he had fallen, but he had his wits about him more than any of the others.

He had guessed how the young rough rider had planned his escape, and now he sprang at him like an enraged tiger.

The attack was unexpected, but it is a hard thing to catch the young rough rider off his guard.

Ted heard the cry of rage and turned just in time to see Platoff hurling himself upon him.

There was no time to draw a weapon.

There was scarcely time to drop the picket line which he was holding in his hand.

Ted did drop it though and lashed out at the count with the weapons that nature had given him.

He landed two blows with left and right, full in the face of the Russian.

Platoff was knocked from his balance and rolled in the dust.

He scrambled to his feet again, but he was not in time.

The second that he sprawled there on the ground was sufficient for the young rough rider.

The horse had been disentangled from the picket line and staggered to its feet.

As it arose, the young rough rider flung himself into the saddle.

Platoff got on his feet only to see the polished horseshoes flash past his head as the animal started away at a frenzied gallop.

He drew a weapon and fired, but the young rough rider had thrown himself far forward on the neck of the horse, riding Comanche fashion, so that there was scarcely anything of him to aim at.

He still had to run the gantlet of the other outlaws, however, and by this time a good many of them had realized what it was that had happened.

None of them thought at first that anyone had escaped from the explosion.

Gardner had dashed away without anyone noticing him.

Some of the outlaws were engaged in stopping and holding such of the runaway horses as they could catch.

The yell that Platoff gave, and the discharge of his revolver, called their attention in the direction of the young rough rider.

They immediately opened fire on him.

From the position he was riding in, Ted did not feel any particular anxiety on his own account.

He was afraid of his horse being hit, but he knew that he could do nothing.

He did not even attempt to guide it, but let it run straight ahead, trusting to its instinct to get away from the place of danger.

Bullets sang past his head, perilously near.

But his animal never stumbled or faltered.

A bullet buried itself in the wood tree of the saddle close to his leg.

It made a crack as it struck the saddle like the crack of a whip.

Then the young rough rider saw a flash close beside him.

His horse staggered and lurched to one side.

It had been hit in the haunch.

Ted could feel the animal give under him and thought that it was going to plunge forward on its shoulder.

He lifted it with the reins all he could.

For a moment it staggered along sidewise, as though it were about to topple to the ground.

Then it pulled itself together and dashed forward again.

"Good horse!" muttered the young rough rider. "We will soon be out of reach of their fire."

He dashed through another clump of bushes, and then out on a hard beaten trail.

He did not know where it led to, but he knew that the best thing to do would be to let the wounded animal have its head.

It might give out at any moment, and the further away the outlaws were when that happened, the better.

The young rough rider knew that they would pursue him and not Gardner.

He had left them behind, for the moment, but he was not out of the woods yet by any means.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE YOUNG ROUGH RIDER DISAPPEARS.

Ted spurred his horse forward, urging it to its best speed.

Once he was outside of the circle of light that came from the ruins of the still burning house, he could only form a very dim idea of where he was going.

The siege of the house, the explosion and the confusion that followed it had taken a good deal of time.

The moon had now set, and it was near morning.

The darkest hours of the night are those immediately before the dawn, and the path down which the young rough rider was being carried was so black and dark that he could not see more than a few feet in front of him.

At any moment the horse might put a forefoot into a hole of some kind and fall.

If that happened, it was ten to one that the rider would be thrown over his head.

But there was nothing for it but to trust to luck and the blind instinct of the horse.

To try to pull him in would be worse than folly.

Nothing could have checked the animal now, maddened as it was with fear.

And there was another reason why the young rough rider did not wish to pull up.

On the flinty trail behind him he could hear the echoing sound of hoofs.

They were the hoofbeats of three or four horses.

Ted knew that some of the outlaws had caught horses and were coming in pursuit.

He looked back but could not see anything at all, although the sound of hoofbeats sounded in his ears.

Around a turn he swung.

The young rough rider glanced about him.

He could see dimly that there were high walls of rock on either side.

His horse gave a long, lurching stagger.

It was bleeding from the wound in its haunch.

The young rough rider thought that it was surely gone this time.

He swung one leg over the saddle, dropped lightly to the ground, and ran a few paces beside the staggering horse.

It raised its head and leaped forward again.

Relieved from the boy's weight it was stronger.

Ted was proficient in all the cavalry exercises which are technically known as "rough riding."

He knew the trick of mounting a horse while at a gallop by vaulting into the saddle.

In reality this is a great deal easier than vaulting on the back of a horse while it is at a standstill, although most people think the contrary.

Keeping one hand twisted in the mane of the horse, and the other clasping the bridle, he ran along beside it, watching it to see how great its strength was.

He saw the blood dripping from its side, and saw its head begin to droop again.

He knew that there was no use remounting, that the animal could not carry him much further.

He released his hold entirely, slapped the animal on the flank and allowed it to go free.

It darted ahead with a sudden spurt, and he could see a few flashes of fire as its hoofs struck the hard stone of the trail.

Then it was gone.

In the meantime, the young rough rider had not been standing still in the middle of the road.

He heard the hoofbeats of the horses of those who were pursuing him.

In another moment they would be around the turn and upon him.

He did not hesitate for an instant.

He sprang over to one side of the road, where the wall of rock did not seem quite so steep.

There was a cranny there up which he could climb, and above it a low-hanging fir tree.

Louder sounded the hoofs of horses around the turn. With the noise was mingled the sound of men's voices.

The young rough rider leaped up toward the tree and caught at the lowest of the branches.

He just managed to grasp it with one hand and hang there.

It bent under his weight, but still it held, and the boy did not hang there very long.

He grasped it with his other hand, and then reaching upward, caught the branch above.

He was not an instant too soon.

As he disappeared from view amid the dark branches that crowned the steep hillside, a band of horsemen swung around the bend of the trail.

Platoff was in the lead.

"There is his horse!" he exclaimed, pulling his own steed up.

Ted knew that the animal he had ridden must be only a few paces away down the road.

Right underneath him were the men who were seeking his life.

He could see the flash of their weapons as they threw them forward.

Then came a succession of spouts of fire from the muzzles of the revolvers and three or four sharp cracks.

"We hit it!" cried Platoff. "It's down! That's the last of the young rough rider!"

Ted, clinging to the tree above his head, looked down at him through the gloom.

It would have been the easiest thing in the world for the young rough rider to have let go his hold and dropped right down on Platoff's back.

In fact, he was tempted to do so for an instant, but it needed no second thought to tell him how reckless this would be.

The men beneath him spurred on a moment later and were lost in the darkness.

"Now is my chance," muttered Ted. "It will not take those fellows long to find out that I was not on the back of that animal. Then they will turn and come along here again to look for me. The higher I climb along this ridge of rock the better it will be for me."

The young rough rider slipped from branch to branch, and then swung in along the trunk of the tree which jutted out over the trail.

He slid down this, paying no attention to the splinters of bark which were driven into his hands or to the tears which his clothing received.

Once on the ground, he started to crawl up through the underbrush.

It was hard work.

In the first place it was so dark that he had to feel along with his hands to know where it was that he was going.

In the second place, the brush was so thick that he had to get through it by main force.

He was on hands and knees.

The rock underneath, up which he was crawling and out of which this tough growth of bushes appeared, cut his hands and knees.

It grew steeper and steeper.

At length he was through the underbrush, and climbing a higher ridge that was even steeper.

The ground over which he had passed had been rocky enough, but this further height had absolutely no soil on it at all.

It seemed to arise in a long ridge like the backbone of some animal.

Save for clefts and fissures that were left in it here and there by the action of frost and water through the course of time, it was almost as smooth as glass, and it sloped up at a very steep angle.

The young rough rider kept on, however, bracing his feet in every inequality of the rock and reaching out with his hands to catch at every crevice above him.

He had not the faintest idea of where he was going or where he was, in fact.

He knew that it would be useless to try to find out before sunrise, but his wisest course, for the present, was to get as far out of the reach of Platoff and his men as possible.

He had not as much further to climb as he thought.

A moment later he had reached out above him and found that there was nothing further to reach.

Then he was up on top of a narrow ledge of rock.

Below him on both sides dropped away a sheer descent of rock.

On the side on which he had climbed it sloped and was broken near the trail by a growth of trees through which he had climbed.

On the other side it was different.

He could not see very well, but still there was light enough from the stars to tell him that the wall of rock on this side dropped away in a sheer perpendicular cliff.

He could not see the bottom of it.

It was lost in the shadows.

The ridge at the top on which he crouched was not more than four feet across.

There were a few bushes growing out of it, here and there, but it would have been the easiest thing in the world for the young rough rider to have crawled clear across it and tumbled down on the other side to his death without having had the faintest warning of his dangerous position.

And there was no doubt in the world but that such a fall would have meant death for him.

He could not see the bottom, but it must have been at least thirty feet below him, and it might have been a great deal deeper.

The young rough rider had hit upon a peculiar rocky formation, such as is to be seen nowhere save in the Western States.

He lay on the top of the rock glancing down at the trail out of which he had climbed.

He could see a faint, white streak through the trees beneath him.

That marked the trail.

And up from it there floated a faint sound of horses and a murmuring of men's voices.

"Platoff and his men have come back there to look for me," muttered Ted. "They will look a long time before they find me. I was above their heads before, but now I am a good deal higher up."

Ted lay on the edge of the rock peeping down and hearing the soft sounds that floated up to him.

Then he heard the distant reverberations of revolver shots.

"They think that they have seen me," he muttered, with a smile. "Or, perhaps, they are just firing on general principles to see if they can't scare me out of my hiding place or hit me with a random shot. But it is no use, Mr. Platoff, I am out of your reach this time, and I don't think that you could find me if you hunted for a week. The only thing for me to do is to make myself comfortable on the top of this ridge and try and sleep a little. When morning comes, I can look around me. But at present, the quieter I keep up here the better. Even if it were daylight, the only things that would see me here would be the eagles."

The young rough rider had slept in many strange beds, but surely this bare ridge of rock, with a precipice on one side and a steep hill on the other, was the strangest of all.

Yet when you have really roughed it, reader, and know what real fatigue means, when you have ridden in the sand and the sun all through a long Western day and only dropped out of the saddle when your horse was too weary to go another step; then you will know what it is to be able to lie down wherever you find yourself and sleep the sleep of the just.

This is what Ted Strong did, a hard stone his pillow, his face upturned to the golden stars that glittered overhead.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TEXAS GIANT.

"Hello thar! Havin' a leetle booty sleep up hyar!"

These were the words uttered in a very loud voice that waked the young rough rider out of a sound slumber.

He sat up and blinked his eyes, not knowing where he was for the moment, or remembering the events of the night before.

It was sunrise.

The sky to the eastward was a beautiful array of pink and pale yellow clouds, and the first rays of the sun had touched all the hilltops and turned them, for the moment, to gold.

The narrow ledge on which the young rough rider lay, was bathed in this pale, beautiful light.

The air was fresh with the freshness of early morning, and there was a sound of the twittering of birds.

Below him on one side stretched the trail, half obscured by the trees that grew out over it, dark in shadow.

On the other side there was a sort of basin, in the center of which could be seen the sparkling gleam of a little lake.

It was surrounded by a range of hills, the ridge on the top of which the young rough rider was lying forming a part of it.

But the young rough rider had eyes for none of these things.

All his attention was directed toward a strange figure.

It was that of a man—and a very large one.

He was about six and a half feet tall and broad in proportion.

He had a round, bullet head crowned with a tangled shock of sandy hair.

His face was large and red, and lined as if with exposure to the weather, but the two blue eyes which were looking at Ted had a humorous and rather kindly gleam in them.

What made the appearance of this man more remarkable was that he was crawling along the ridge of rock on all fours.

It was narrow, the fall on either side was considerable though not so great as the young rough rider had fancied the night before, and this giant evidently did not feel like trusting himself to walk along upright.

He had enormously long arms and, standing as he was, peering at the young rough rider on hands and knees, he looked like some strange and new species of animal rather than anything else.

No man on earth, wakened out of a sound sleep by such an apparition, could have looked at it coolly.

In the twinkling of an eye, the young rough rider had leaped to his feet and had drawn his revolver.

The giant—for he was a giant in stature, half arose also.

"Hull on thar pard!" he said. Easy there with yer gun! I ain't used ter havin' guns pulled on me. If yer gets too gay with it I might spring upon yer and rend yer, as ther lion said ter ther unicorn."

"Who are you?" said the young rough rider, stepping back a pace further and looking the fellow over.

"Put up yer gun, gol-ding yer! or I'll jump on yer an' crush yer ter earth, as ther elephant said ter ther monkey."

The young rough rider did not put up his gun.

Threats generally had with him the opposite to the effect intended.

He leveled it at the round, bullet head of the giant.

"Stay where you are, and don't try any jumping or falling on me."

"Why not?"

"Because if you make a move in my direction I'll drop you."

"This is a nice, sociable way ter greet a feller."

"I can't help it. I've been through a lot of rough work lately, and I'm not in a temper to stand much fooling. Tell me who you are and what you are doing here."

"I've as much right ter ask you that question."

"Maybe so; but I have the drop on you."

The giant looked for a moment as though he were going to spring upon the boy.

There was something in the steady glance of the brown eyes of the young rough rider that made him decide not to.

He scratched his head in a puzzled fashion.

"Gol-ding it! yer has ther drop on me as the feller in ther elyvator said when ther rope broke an' it went tumblin' down," he muttered.

"Who are you? Tell me your business and who you are, and I'll put up my gun."

"My name is Don Train, I useter be a cowboy down in Texas. Then I worked in a show, and ther last thing I did was ter get drunk and stay drunk fer a week."

"You are not in the service of Count Platoff."

"If he was here I'd soon show you whether I was in his service or not. He's ther feller that had me tied up last night down thar where they hev ther gal in the cabin. If I ever get my hands on him I'll plate him off, all right. I'll paste him in the eye so hard that he'll think thet a gol-dinged cyclone hit him."

"What! Were you a prisoner of Platoff's?"

The young rough rider lowered his revolver.

"You bet I was. I was drunk down at San Pablo, and I went wanderin' in the hills too dead drunk ter know where I was goin'. I wound up down thar," the giant pointed down into the basin which was now growing clearer in the light of the rising sun and in which could be seen a few scattered cabins. "I went ter sleep in a cabing. I was woke up by a gal in thar. She told me thet she was a pris'ner an' that a yap named No-account Plate-off or some such fool name was a holdin' her. She was so pretty thet I was mad clear through. Then ther door opens an' this yere Plate-off, he sails inter me. We mixes it up on ther floor when a lot of other tin-horns hops in an' sits on me. There wasn't nuthin' doin' then fer Don Train."

"They overpowered you?"

"I dunno—they sat all over me an' tied me up an' then left me in another stable."

"How did you get up here?"

"I lay there for a while. Yer see when they sailed in on me I wasn't right strong. I had been sleepin' off ther drink. But I'm strong. Look at them muscles."

The giant doubled up his arm.

The biceps bulged out so that it seemed as if the old shirt sleeve would burst.

The muscles on the shoulder stood out in great, hard knots and bunches.

"I see," said the young rough rider. "As soon as you were right awake I suppose that you snapped the cords with which they bound you."

"Yer supposes dead right. That's what I did. I pulled ther gol-dinged door outer ther cabing they put me in an' crawled out inter ther night, as ther feller says when he was kicked outer ther barroom fer not payin' fer ther last round of drinks thet he ordered."

"And what were you doing crawling along here like a cat?"

"Tryin' ter get outer ther gol-dinged hole."

"Why didn't you get out the way that you came in?"

"That there plan wasn't feasible, as ther feller said when he was dead broke an' was ast ter pay his fare on a railroad train."

"Why not?"

"I come in here down a stream thet runs inter ther lake. I fell inter it an' was washed down it like I was a hunk of driftwood."

"And you couldn't swim back against the current?"

"Yer guessed right ther very first time. Thet's exactly what I couldn't do. If it had been a current of whisky, I might have tried it—but water—ter think of swimmin' in thet makes me shudder."

"You scaled those cliffs?"

"Further down they is lower. I came up there an' was tryin' ter find a way down ther other side without breakin' my neck when——"

"You came upon me, eh?"

"Yep; lyin' ther like a sleepin' booty."

The young rough rider smiled and sat down beside Don Train.

"I've heard of you before," he said. "I used to have a ranch in Texas. I offered you a job on my ranch, but you were too much taken up with the show business."

"I wish I had took it. No more show business fer me. But what were there name of ther ranch?"

"Las Animas."

"Las Animas Ranch?"

"Yes."

"In Dimmit County?"

"Yes."

"In ther State of Texas?"

"The same."

"An you was ther owner of it?"

"Part owner. Some other fellows were in it with me."

There was a smile on the face of the young rough rider.

Don Train drew off and looked him over with an expression of growing wonder on his face.

"I might have knowed it," he said, slowly. "Then there's ther brown soldier clothes thet I have hearn he wears—pard, it ain't pussible—but it must be! Say! Is you ther young rough rider?"

"That's who I am."

"Ted Strong by name?"

"Precisely."

"Ther owner of ther Black Mounting Ranch an' of ther Las Animas?"

"Yes."

"Ther organizer of ther young rough riders?"

"I helped to form the organization."

"Ther champeen dead shot of ther West? Ther best rider thet ever jumped inter a saddle in all ther country? Ther best man at ropin' a steer in ther West? One of ther most successful ranch owners? Ther terror of all crooks an' criminals?"

"Hold on!" laughed Ted. "I am the young rough rider all right, but I don't believe that I am all of those things."

"An' ter think," said Train, solemnly, "thet I had ther nerve ter think of jumpin' yer! Yer would have peppered me sure."

"It isn't safe to try to jump any man when he has the drop on you."

But ther young rough rider! I see yer him, all right! But, say! I had heerd so much about ther young rough rider an' what he could do thet I thought he was bigger——"

"Than you are?"

"I dunno. But yer ther genooine article, all right. Pard, I shore apolergizes fer actin' in any way rude."

"I don't think that you acted rudely."

"I knowed thet there was somethin' ter yer when yer looked me in ther eye. I felt sorter cowed then. I might have knowed. But, pard! Are yer willin' ter shake hands with me?"

"Are you willing to join with me in getting that girl out of the hands of that villain, Platoff?"

"Yer bet I am! She's a gol-dinged nice gal, as ther boot black said about ther millionaire's daughter, an' I'm with yer ter ther death. We'll smash this yer Plate-off till he looks like a sellin' plater."

"Shake!"

Their hands met and then and there the young rough rider and the Texas giant united forces against Platoff.

CHAPTER X.

TO SAVE ALICIA.

Ten minutes later the young rough rider and the Texas giant were crawling cautiously along the ledge of rock.

Ted was in the lead and Don Train was coming after him as gracefully as his large size would admit of his moving.

The giant was weaponless, but when they came to a clump of bushes that grew out of the side of the rock Train selected a hickory sapling and broke it off.

This action, in itself, showed the strength of his hands.

After pulling the smaller twigs from the sapling he had in his hand a club, as tough as a piece of steel and nearly as hard.

It was almost four feet in length and nearly as thick as the giant's own wrist.

At the end was a great, heavy knot.

"Thar!" said Train, holding it up and looking at it with no little satisfaction. That's what I call a pooty hefty leedle stick. If a fellow gets a clout on the head with thet thar he'll know he was hit."

"I dare say he will," said Ted, "but the chances are that there will be no opportunity to hit anyone on the head. There are at least a dozen armed men in this place."

"With ther young rough rider ter lead me I'll clean out ther hull durn caboodle o' them."

"I don't think that you will. The young rough rider isn't going to lead you into any such rash undertaking, anyway. Let me tell you that."

"We could do it all right. There's thet pore gal in there. She hes ter be rescued, as ther boy said about ther hunk of taffy thet he dropped inter ther river an' dived in 'after, thereby spoilin' his new suit of clothes an' gettin' a lickin' from his maw."

"Yes, she has to be rescued. But if we are going to rescue her we will have to have some caution."

"Don Train didn't never bother with no caution."

"And he landed in among a gang of thugs who would have killed him as like as not."

"I guess as how they would. I heard them talkin' as how I knew too much an' how they was thinkin' it was wise ter kill me in ther mornin'. Thet sobered me up more'n anythin' else."

"That sort of a prospect generally does sober a man up a little."

"Yer right it does. Thet's why I was so gol-dinged anxious ter break them ther bonds an' crawl outer ther gol-dinged place."

"And if you had been more cautious you would never have got into it at all."

"I guess yer right boss. But a man isn't very cautious when he's full of corn juice as he kin hold."

"Of course not. There's a temperance lesson in that."

"Yer right ther is. Say boss, I wants ter ask yer a question, as ther feller says when he was goin' ter perpose ter ther gal."

"Go ahead and ask it."

"Well, is it true that you don't never take a drink?"

"Quite true."

"An' you has so many friends? Do you mean ter say thet yer never was drunk?"

"That's just what I mean to say."

"Waal I swan! as ther farmer says when they told him thet ther gold brick thet he hed bought fer three thousand dollars wasn't solid, as he thought it was, but only plated. Ef thet don't beat ther Dutch. I heerd thet yarn about yer but I never believed it. I thought that ther temperance people was a lot of pale faces; yahoots who didn't know enough to take a drink."

"That's where you thought wrong. Most people realize now that liquor and the indulgence in it never does any good and generally does a lot of harm. Doctors have told

us that it does not give real strength. It makes us think that we are stronger while it really weakens us. People are drinking less, now that they realize that fact."

"Is that right? Yer not stringin' me, are yer, as ther heads says ter ther little gal who was plannin' ter make a necklace outer them?"

"It's a fact."

"Well, from this on, Don Train don't never take no more drinks. Ther water waggin fer mine! Me fer ther clear an' pellucid rivulet! No more leanin' up against bars absorbin' corn juice till I smell like a distillery! No more goin' on tears! No more lookin' on ther wine when it is red nor ther whisky nuther! Rough rider, yer has converted me ter ther temperance brigade."

"I am glad to hear it, and I hope that you will stick to your good resolve. But there are other things besides temperance that we will have to look into at present. We will have to be very cautious. The fellows in here will be getting up soon. Do you know if Platoff went back into his den last night?"

"Sure he did. There's an entrance through the side of a hill further round. There's an underground passage there. They keep it guarded or I would have tried to escape that way. I heerd them comin' back as I was comin' up ther side of ther hill. They was wounded some on them an' some on them hed lost their hosses an' was ridin' double.

"They was in bad humor from what I heerd them say. Especially Plate-off."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Ted, with a grim smile. "They had a little run in with me last night, and I think that I left them something to remember me by."

"You did, eh? That reminds me thet I didn't ask you why you was up sleepin' on thet there rock."

In a few words the young rough rider related what had happened during the night, and said that he thought that Gardner had escaped to Monterey.

The giant heard him with many exclamations of surprise and wonder, and would have talked for a long time about it had not Ted cut him short.

"We will have time to talk that all over later on," he said. "At present, the important thing is to locate the cabin where the girl is kept and to hit upon the best way of getting her out of it. I might go back to Monterey and bring a sheriff and a crowd of men, but I hate to leave the girl with that Russian near her."

"Sure, he's no durn good."

"He's a brute. It is dangerous for that girl to be in his power for a moment."

By this time the two had crawled a considerable distance along the ridge of rock.

Ted could see that, as Don Train had said, the cliff was not nearly so high at this point.

The ridge was sloping down further and further toward the basin.

It was still a considerable height above it, however, more than the young rough rider would have liked to jump.

Further on, they could see where the straight up-and-down cliff changed to a gentle slope, which it was quite possible to have climbed.

"Thet is whar I come up," said the giant, pointing to it. "An' over thar is ther cabing of ther gal."

"And there goes some one toward it out of that other cabin."

"It's Count Plate-off, by gum!"

It was indeed Platoff.

From where the two were crouching on the top of the cliff, screened by a growth of scrubby trees and bushes, they had a good view of the cabin and of the figure that was advancing toward it.

There was no mistaking that figure.

It was the burly, thickset form of the Russian count.

"That's the son-of-a-gun that mixed it up with me last night," growled the Texas giant. "Thar he goes, swaggerin' along as if he owns the earth. He gives me a pain in the neck. Wait till he mixes it up with me again! Wait till I fan him a couple on the side of the head with this yer club. I'll give him a few delicit little pokes with this."

Don Train swung the piece of a tree that he carried and made it swish through the air.

"I'd like to get hold of him myself," said the young rough rider, between set teeth. "He is one of the worst villains unhung."

"Come on, then! We'll climb down thar an' hammer ther head off him. We'll show him what ther young rough rider an' ther Texas giant kin do when they're younited, one an' inseparable, now an' forever!"

Train started off toward the slope up which he had climbed, at a rapid gait.

Ted put his hand on his arm and detained him.

"Where are you going?" he said.

"Where am I goin'? Where would I be goin'? I'm goin' down thar ter make that thar no-account look like he was a scrambled egg. That's whar I'm goin'."

He started off again, and it was all that the young rough rider could do to hold him back.

Clearly, caution and forethought were not strong points with the Texas giant.

"Stay here!" said the young rough rider, holding him so that he couldn't move. "We can only reconnoiter now."

"An' see thet feller go inter thet cabing?"

"You know as well as I do that they are six to one in here. We will get the girl out, but we will never get her out if you go on that way."

"Waal, I'm a-goin' down——"

"Hush! There are people walking along beneath. Lie flat on your face."

Both crouched behind the shrubbery and waited. There were footsteps and the voices of men sounding beneath them, at the bottom of the cliff.

CHAPTER XI.

THE YOUNG ROUGH RIDER PLAYS A PART.

For a moment it was all that the young rough rider could do to control his companion and keep him quiet.

The Texas giant had one of those irrepressible natures that are liable to break loose at any moment without the slightest regard to the consequences.

Train's temper was up now, and all that he wanted was to sail into Platoff and beat him with his club.

He never took into consideration the fact that there

were enough outlaws in the place to overpower him easily.

Besides this he was unarmed save for his big club.

The young rough rider, however, had a wonderful influence over him.

There is something about Ted Strong that commands respect and attention from every one, and after a few whispered words in the ear of the Texas giant, the latter crouched down as quiet and still as the young rough rider himself.

The men who were walking along below had come to a standstill.

They had heard some rustling sound at the top of the cliff, and all three were staring up at it.

Two of them were old, bearded fellows, their faces showing in the cruel lines about the mouth the lives of violence and dissipation that they had led.

The third was younger and something of the same size and build as the young rough rider himself.

He was dressed in rough frontier garb, and his face showed that, although young in years, he was as old in crime as his associates.

"I thought I heard something queer at the top there," he muttered. "I have half a mind to go up and see."

"Yer gettin' nervous, Vernon," said one of the elders.

"Why wouldn't I be nervous, Red? The young rough rider is loose."

"After all the chase that you fellows had after him last night?" said the fellow who had been addressed as Red.

"And he knows that Platoff is somewhere here," said Vernon.

"Shucks!" said the third man. "He won't bother no more. He come too near gittin' killed last night."

"You're a fool, Shorty," said Vernon, spitting out a mouthful of tobacco juice.

"Why am I a fool?"

"What you don't know about the young rough rider would fill a whole lot of books."

"You think you know everything."

"I know a thing or two. I know why Ted Strong is goin' after Platoff, ther Russian thet hired us fer this job."

"On account of ther gal, perhaps," suggested Red.

"Gal nuthin'," said Vernon, contemptuously. "It's more than thet. Yer know thet Platoff stole ther papers givin' a right ter thet mine."

"An' thet's why ther young rough rider is a-goin' arter him, eh?" asked Shorty.

"Sure," said Vernon. "He has bought ther mine."

"That shows what a gol-durned fool yer are," said Shorty. "Yer thinks yer knows so much. He hasn't got them papers."

"He has. He got them afore he killed Gardner."

"He didn't. I was in ther room when he was tryin' ter git it outer Gardner. The feller wouldn't tell where they was hid an' we searched ther hull house an' couldn't find them. Then Gardner laffed at us an' told us thet we was fools fer our pains. He said thet he hed sent the papers ter Monterey fer safe-keepin' thet mornin'."

"He did, eh?"

"Yes, he did. An' Platoff was so mad thet he hauled out his gun and fired at him twice through ther head an' ther heart. He left him as dead as a boiled lobster."

"An' ther papers in Monterey all the time."

"Yep."

The young rough rider could hear this conversation from where he lay.

A smile came over his face at these words—a smile that Train could not understand.

At that moment, the papers that the men were talking about were in an inner pocket of his khaki jacket.

He had brought them out of the burning house in safety.

"Then all he got was ther gal?" said Vernon.

"Thet was all. But he was durn glad ter get her. He hed thet cabin all fixed up fer her."

"The cabin thet he found that big crazy man in?"

Train nudged Ted in the side.

"That means me," he said. "Wait till I get a crack at them fellers."

"That big feller was ther biggest bluff I ever saw. He was as big as a house. You would have thought that he could licked ten of us, but when we piled on him he caved in like a lamb."

"Do ye hear thet?" whispered Train, who was literally foaming at the mouth in his efforts to keep quiet.

"Shut up!" said the young rough rider, in the same tone.

"Platoff didn't know that he escaped an' got away," said Red.

"No; an' I'm not a-goin' ter tell him," said Shorty.

"I'm a-goin' ter tell you," muttered the Texas giant.

"That's right," said Vernon. "It would make him wild. Especially as we failed to capture the young rough rider last night."

"He'll forget all about it," said Red.

"Sure," said Vernon. "I'm not a-goin' ter go near him. I'm a-goin' ter sit here an' have a quiet smoke."

"Give us a light," said Shorty. The young rough rider could hear the sound of matches being struck, and a moment later a faint whiff of tobacco floated up to his nostrils.

"Where are ther others of ther gang?" asked Red. "I saw them start off."

"Platoff sent them off. Thet is, all except ther wounded ones, who are up in ther big cabing. They air goin' ter Monterey ter buy a rig."

"Buy a rig?"

"Yes, a carriage of some kind. He wants ter take ther gal down ter 'Frisco. He's afraid ter take her far on hossback, an' he dassent go ter Monterey ter take ther train. He is goin' ter ther next town further on."

"Isn't he afraid of bein' caught?"

"He's goin' ter shave his whiskers off an' travel as a Frenchman."

"And ther fellers as has gone ter Monterey?"

"They're all rigged up like a gang of cowpunchers out fer a holiday. Nobody would know them. They're safe enough."

"Well," said Shorty, meditatively sucking at his pipe, "if anybody tried ter attack this place now he would come at a good time. There's a bunch of men in ther cabin thet ther young rough rider shot. They cain't do anythin'."

"Then there's a man guardin' ther passidge."

"He's only one an' he's likely asleep. He was up all night."

"An' then there's ourselves an' Platoff."

"That is all," said Vernon, "but there aint no danger. Ther young rough rider will go all ther way to Monterey."

"How do yer suppose he got away?" asked Shorty.

"Thats more than I know. We found the hoss, but never a trace of him. He's pretty slick."

The conversation ceased now, and the three sucked away at their pipes.

It is needless to say that the young rough rider was listening to this talk with the greatest interest.

He had noticed that the basin which the outlaws had evidently made their headquarters was deserted looking.

Platoff had entered the cabin occupied by the girl, and there was no one else in sight except the three men below.

Ted wished to have a look at these three who had been discussing him so freely.

He knew that their attention had been directed away from the top of the cliff by this time, and that it would be safe to move about a little.

Motioning to the Texas giant to remain where he was, he arose to his feet noiselessly.

There was a fir tree growing at the very edge of the cliff.

One of its branches hung down over it.

The young rough rider made for this tree without a sound.

He had trailed so long in the woods and on the plains that he could move as noiselessly as an Indian if need be.

He saw that the thick, dark foliage of the evergreen would conceal him effectually from those below, and his khaki clothes were of a dull, neutral color that is not distinguishable at any distance.

He swung his revolver around behind him, and when that was done there was nothing about his costume that would catch the eye.

If the outlaws should see him crouching among the branches of the tree they would not be able to tell him from the reddish stone of the cliff.

The young rough rider had learned the art of concealment from the Indians.

One of the secrets of it is the proper matching of color.

When one object is placed upon another of the same color, the eye cannot tell them apart at any distance.

The young rough rider moved softly out on the branch of the fir tree and looked down.

He could see the three men standing beneath him.

They all wore slouch hats.

They had stopped smoking now and put up their pipes.

The young rough rider was meditating as to whether or not he should attack them at this time.

They were below him at his mercy.

He had just heard that the rest of the available men had left the place.

He swung his belt around, and was just about ready to pull his weapon when his plan was knocked on the head.

Don Train, the Texas giant, was the cause of this.

He had lain quietly obeying the orders of the young rough rider for a moment or so, and then had been unable to restrain himself any longer.

He arose and leaned his weight against the tree.

The branch on which the young rough rider was sitting was strong enough to support his weight without bending.

Ted, in spite of his great strength, is so cleanly and lightly built that he weighs something between one hundred and fifty and one hundred and sixty pounds in his khaki uniform, with leggins, spurs and sombrero.

The weight of Don Train, however, is a different story.

It is over the three-hundred mark.

Consequently, when he leaned forward, incautiously, and threw himself against the trunk of the tree for support, it yielded.

Train never thought of his own weight, and the sight of the young rough rider, sitting there on the branch, made him think that it would bear him also.

But when he leaned against the trunk it bent under him —partly, of course, from the weight of the young rough rider on the branch, which helped to pull it outward.

The branch had sloped downward at a sharp angle, and at first Ted had held himself on it with his hands to keep himself from slipping down toward the end.

He found that he could maintain himself without this, however, and he had let go of it in order to reach for his weapon.

It was at this moment, the worst that he could have chosen, that Don Train had thrown his heavy bulk against the trunk of the tree.

As it bent outward, the branch on which the young rough rider was sitting tilted downward still more.

It was only a little, but that little was enough.

Ted had not been expecting anything of the sort.

His whole attention had been riveted on the three men beneath him, and he had never dreamed that Train would have thought of climbing out on the tree.

When the branch was tilted forward it took him by surprise.

He could not even raise his hands.

Before he could make a move of any kind, he had slid off it as if he had been sliding down a chute.

Down went the young rough rider, feet first, right in the midst of his three enemies.

He landed on his feet, but the shock from the fall was so great that he stood there stock-still for a moment.

The three outlaws drew back in surprise and then dashed at him.

It was only for a moment that the young rough rider was dazed and stunned.

He had kept his feet, and he had landed in soft earth so that the fall did not injure him or shake him up as it would had he landed on hard ground.

The moment that the three outlaws spent in gazing at him in surprise was sufficient for him to recover himself, and when they went at him they found that he was ready for them.

Vernon, the youngest of the trio, was the quickest.

He was about the same size as the young rough rider, and he sprang at him like a tiger.

Ted struck out at him, but the fellow saw the blow coming.

He ran in under it and threw his arms around the waist of the young rough rider.

He was evidently something of a boxer from the way he dodged the blow.

But Ted had more tricks than one at his command.

As Vernon grappled with him he brought both his hands up inside of Vernon's arms with a sudden movement, that, for a second, pushed the outlaw away from him.

In that instant, Ted grasped at his throat with both hands, and, bracing himself, pushed his head backward with all his might.

Vernon was strong, but his strength was nothing against that of the young rough rider.

He strained, but his head went back and his grip was broken.

He could not speak.

With a fling of terrible force the young rough rider threw him from him.

At the same time he had crooked his heel behind the outlaw's, and, as he fell, he swept his feet from under him.

Vernon went down with a thud.

All this had taken much less in the doing than it takes in the telling or reading.

It had passed with the quickness of light, and before the other two outlaws were fully aware of what had happened, they saw their companion thrown heavily on the ground several feet away from the young rough rider.

They sprang at him.

Ted was playing for time to draw a weapon, but they closed in on him.

He ducked under Shorty's arm and gave him a punch in the ribs that sent him staggering.

Then he wheeled and flashed out his weapon.

At the same time Red grasped his wrist with both his hands from behind.

He had the young rough rider at a disadvantage, and, to save his wrist from being broken, Ted had to drop the weapon.

He turned, though, and brought up his knee, driving it hard into the pit if Red's stomach.

Red grunted and nearly fell over.

He reached for the weapon that lay on the ground, but the young rough rider brought his foot down on his fingers with a stamp that brought a cry of pain from him.

Ted turned again to see that Shorty had drawn and was about to fire on him.

But as his finger crooked about the trigger he was felled to the earth with a terrible thump on the head.

It was delivered by the Texas giant.

He had seen the fight start, and he had run down to the slope and scrambled down that way with a speed that the young rough rider had not thought him capable of.

He had wisely refrained from jumping down after Ted.

A drop of that kind, from a man of his weight, would in all probability have meant a pair of broken legs.

He had just got down in the nick of time, and he had brought his immense club down on Shorty's head with unerring aim.

Then he started for Red.

Red took one look at the gigantic club and the still more gigantic figure, and that was enough.

He turned in his tracks and started away as fast as his legs would carry him.

But he was not fast enough to escape the Texas giant.

Train took one wild leap and swung his club again.

The big knot at the end of it struck the man between the shoulder blades.

He went down on his face as though he had been struck by a thunderbolt.

Train turned and waved his club in the air.

"Hooray fer us!" he cried. "Hooray fer ther young rough rider an' ther Texas giant. The greatest combination on ther face of ther earth."

Ted was on his knees already binding Vernon hand and foot.

"We are not through yet," he said. "Take your belt off, and take their belts and tie these other fellows up Take their revolvers."

The Texas giant could obey a command. A moment or so later all three of the outlaws were tied up. Vernon had come to.

Red was groaning with pain.

Shorty was still unconscious.

"Now," said Ted. "You know where the entrance is?"

"Yes."

"There is a guard in there—probably asleep. Go and bind him up. I'll attend to these fellows and then take care of Platoff."

"What air yer doin' takin' off your clothes?" asked Train, looking in surprise at the young rough rider, who had cast his jacket on the ground already.

"I want to take Platoff by surprise, and, to do so, I am going to make up as this fellow. You attend to the guard at the gate. Hurry!"

Train would have liked to stop and see how the young rough rider disguised himself, but there was a tone of command in the boy's voice. He hurried off at once.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAST OF PLATOFF.

Ted proceeded to make himself up to resemble Vernon as closely as possible.

He felt confident that he could get the better of Platoff without any advantage at all, but he knew that the safety of the girl depended on his success, and he took every precaution that he could against failure.

It did not take him long to effect a decided change in his appearance.

He divested Vernon of his outer garments and donned them, pulling on the rough, red shirt and the coat that the outlaw had worn.

Then he took the sombrero from his head and pulled it down over his own brows.

He picked up his revolver from where it lay on the ground, brushed the dirt out of it, and, throwing the chambers open, blew through the long barrel to see that it was clear.

It might not be necessary to use the weapon, but in case he did need it he wanted it to be in the best of condition.

Then he set off for Platoff's cabin—or, rather, the

cabin in which he had put the girl and which he had entered a short time ago.

Ted tried the door and found that it was locked.

He could hear the voice of the count inside.

He was trying to persuade the girl to marry him and go to Russia with him.

She was crying.

The young rough rider could hear her sobs.

Ted knocked on the door.

Platoff broke off in his talk with an oath.

"Who is there?" he said.

"Vernon," came the answer, in a strangely muffled voice.

"What do you want? What are you doing about here? Can't you leave me alone?"

"I must see you."

"Get away or I'll come out and shoot you."

"It is important that you come out."

"Why? What is wrong?"

"A prisoner has escaped."

"Who?"

"Train, the Texan."

"Well, don't bother me about that now. Get away, I tell you."

It was evidently the resolve of the Russian to be left undisturbed.

But the young rough rider had made up his mind to get inside.

"You are wanted at the entrance," he said. "The young rough rider has attacked it."

He could hear Platoff swearing in Russian while he shot back the bolts of the door.

"Why did you not tell me at once?" he said, as he flung it open.

Ted stalked past him into the room.

"Get out of here, you fool," shouted Platoff. "Get out or I'll throw you out."

"I don't think so," said the young rough rider, stepping between the count and the girl.

"Vernon! you are crazy! I have paid you well. I want to be alone."

While this had been going on, Ted had been stepping between the count and a table on which lay two revolvers.

When he had blocked him off from that, his hand came out from his pocket.

In it was a revolver, and it covered Platoff's breast.

"Vernon! are you crazy?"

Ted with his left hand pushed back his hat and looked the Russian squarely in the eyes.

"The young rough rider!" yelled Platoff, staggering back.

"Ted Strong!" gasped the girl, who had been watching the whole scene with wide-open eyes.

"Put up your hands, Platoff," said Ted, in a ringing voice.

"Up with your hands or I fire. Up with your hands! I have you covered. I take no more chances with you."

Platoff's hands did not go up as the young rough rider had expected.

Instead of that he seemed to go mad with rage. With a wild yell he dashed at the boy.

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you!" he yelled.

He ran in under the revolver, and his hands grasped at the throat of the young rough rider.

As has been said, the Russian was enormously strong.

He threw the young rough rider off his balance.

Ted was thrown to the ground, the Russian on top of him.

For a moment, they struggled there.

Then the revolver went off.

It was not Ted who had fired it.

In one of his wild struggles the count had grasped at it and the trigger had been pulled.

There was a groan from Platoff.

He rolled on his back, blood pouring from a wound in his throat.

He had shot himself in his effort to point the revolver at the young rough rider, and had shot himself fatally.

One glance convinced the young rough rider of this fact.

He bent over and tried to stanch the blood that was pouring from the wound in the man's throat.

But there was no use trying.

A few moments later the young rough rider bent lower and felt the heart of his enemy.

It had ceased to beat.

Ted stood up and looked at the girl.

"He is dead," he said. "He will trouble you no more. Let me help you out of here."

Alicia was weak and pale.

She reached out her arm and the young rough rider helped her to the door.

As they came out Don Train rushed up.

"I finished that fellow outside," he said. "There's a bunch of men outside from Monterey. I showed them the way through the passage. They were hunting for it on the trail outside. Gardner is leading them."

"My father!" said Alicia. "Alive."

"Alive and well!" said Ted. He pointed across the valley to where a party of horsemen were approaching. In the lead rode Gardner, one arm in a sling.

Alicia saw him and ran toward him. A moment later they were in each other's arms.

* * * * * * *

Don Train is now a cowpuncher on the Las Animas Ranch of the young rough rider.

The San Pablo mines are now being worked, and a handsome revenue comes out of them. The money for their purchase made Gardner a rich man, and he and Alicia are in Europe, where the girl is completing her education.

Platoff, the Russian count, was buried in the stronghold of the outlaws.

All the wounded in the cabin were taken prisoner as well as those who had been sent to Monterey in disguise, and the band was cleaned out for good and all.

The people of San Pablo still speak of Ted Strong, the young rough rider, as the man who stamped out outlawry there and made the country inhabitable for decent people.

THE END.

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